

Reflecting on a period of change in a governmental development agency:  
understanding management as the patterning of interaction and politics

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Submitted to the University of Hertfordshire in Partial Fulfilment of the  
requirements of the Doctor of Management Programme

April 2012

## **Abstract**

**Key words:** Management tools, public sector, international development, power relationships, local interaction, complex responsive process of relating, organizational change, identity, values, meanings, human behaviour, political behaviour, reality, social order, involvement and detachment, reflection, reflexivity, making sense, context, management practice.

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Management was once described as the art of getting things done through the efforts of oneself and other people (Follett, 1941) and is functionalised through acts of planning, organising, leading and controlling tasks and people for pre-defined objectives. These four cardinal pillars of management are translated into various models, tools and techniques of best practice of how to manage. While acknowledging that the substance of the current management models, tools and techniques have for years broadly contributed to how organisations are run, my research sheds more light on the shortcomings underlying some of the assumptions and ways of thinking behind these models and tools. My research findings based on my experience in working for the Department for International Development suggests that management practice and organisational change occur in the context of human power relationships in which people constrain and enable each other on the basis of human attributes such as identities, attitudes, values, perceptions, emotions, fears, expectations, motives and interests. I argue that these human attributes, human power relations and the totality of human emotions arise in the social, and understanding the ways in which these attributes shape local interaction and daily human relating is critical in making sense of the reality of organisational change and management. I suggest that management practice occurs in the context of everyday politics of human relating. It is that type of politics that takes place within families, groups of people, organisations, communities, and indeed throughout all units of society around the distribution of power, wealth, resources, thoughts and ideas. This way of thinking has enormous implications for the way we

conceptualise management theory and practice. I am suggesting that managers do not solely determine, nor do employees freely choose their identities, attitudes, values, perceptions, emotions, fears, expectations and motives. These human dimensions arise from social relationships and personal experiences. As such, it is simply not for a manager to decide or force other employees on which of these human attributes to influence their behaviour. I am arguing that the social nature of management practice and role of human agents is inherently complex and cannot, in the scientific sense, be adequately reduced to discrete, systematic, complete and predictive models, tools and techniques without losing some meaning of what we do in management.

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## Acronyms

ASARECA	Association for Strengthening Agriculture Research in East & Central Africa
CRD	Central Research Department
DFID	Department for International Development
ED	Executive Director
ESAP	Economic Structural Adjustment Programme
FANR	Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MBA	Masters in Business Administration
MBO	Management by Objectives
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development
OMD	Obsessive Measurement Disorder
POLC	Planning, Organising, Leading and Controlling
SADC	Southern Africa Development Community
SRO	Sub Regional Organisation
TORs	Terms of Reference
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WECARD	West & Central Africa Agricultural Research & Development

# INTRODUCTION

## Research context

This research is an inquiry into how I understand management in a governmental development agency. I work as an Adviser in the Department for International Development (DFID). My role involves providing professional advice on governance and institutional issues relating to the department's legal mandate to provide development assistance to help poor people in developing countries of the world. The primary purpose of the department is to help reduce poverty and promote economic growth among the poor people of the world. I work alongside other professional advisers who specialise in different areas of our work. As my department is part of the civil service, my work involves working in harmony with other government departments and within the structures set up by politicians from time to time.

A major part of my narrative research is located in this context of international development where national and international agents act on the basis of what is seen as a global commitment to eradicating poverty in the world. My narrative critically draws from some major changes that I experienced in my department. I examined the experience of managerial control and change management in my department, including challenging some of the existing conventional views about management practice. The inquiry looked at how understanding change as continuous emergence of reality helps broaden perspectives and how we understand management theory and practice. I looked in particular, at how social interactions manifested themselves as political behaviour during management of change in the Department and what this means for my practice. It became clear during my inquiry that much as staff members and management were operating in organisational settings governed by normative civil service rules and code of conduct, their actual behaviours were in the main shaped by the environment which they were forming for each other. They constrained and enabled each other not only on the basis of rational and objective thinking, but in ways that reflected personal and group identities, fears, ambitions, interests, anxieties, egos and emotions. I could not see

the beginning or end of change within the Department. Our individual and collective behaviours were creating change at the same time that those changes were shaping our behaviours. The civil service management practice increasingly reflected amplified political behaviours that could neither be predicted nor controlled by any one person. Those political behaviours reflected contestations over distribution of power and human power relations with respect to policy and priorities, resources and results, thoughts and ways of making sense as well as ideas about what is development. As employees of the Department, we were co-creating new realities that constituted change.

My inquiry also looked at this global commitment, symbolised by the United Nations backed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as representing an idealised sense of unity, generalised as the solution to the diverse and multi-dimensional problems that individuals and communities face in their daily lives. I found myself questioning some of the underlying assumption made in this commitment that a group of country leaders can decide and plan what the world should and will look like in future.

### **Research themes**

I am taking up sociological and social psychological perspectives by different writers in this research as a basis for interrogating existing ways of thinking behind the current management theory and practice in my Department where I work. I do so by raising critical questions relating to the role and impact of daily social interaction between and within individuals and groups of individuals during management practice. The research examines how people as individuals and groups become who they are and how they make sense of what goes on around them, as well as discussing what this may mean for the existing management theory and my practice. The research starts by providing an account of how I came to be who I am, the way I make sense of the world as well as some movement in my ways of thinking during the research. I focus on a number of critical themes that help me to understand social and organisational change as well as strategic management. The research explores the important role of identity, sense making, local interaction, social control, social change and their impact on global or macro patterns that form

management practice in organisations. My interest is in understanding how power relations, values, rules, identities, norms, ideologies and the totality of the individual's emotions arise in society and organisations and how these shape local interaction and daily human relating. This helped me in understanding how the reality of social and organisational change is shaped and the implications for the arena of management. I explore these issues in the context of my own childhood socialisation and personal experiences, particularly through social and formal institutions as well as during my working life in the Civil Service. The research is in part fulfilment of the requirements for a Doctor of Management programme.

### **Research projects and method**

This research seeks to build knowledge from practice for practice. I use a narrative methodology in which my own experience as a participant in management practice in the public sector is the object of research. Through reflection and reflexivity, I draw meanings that are relevant for others in similar practice. In Chapter 1 Project 1, I trace my life and how I became who I am and the way I understand the world around me. I recount my socialisation and my early career experiences working for a developing country government ministry of finance. I reflect on that experience and try to make sense of it using perspectives offered by a number of writers. My narrative also brings out how that working environment gave me a reality check on my earlier socialisation. Chapter 2, Project 2 narrates my experiences of changes that occurred in DFID soon after I joined the department. The changes gave me some basis for challenging some of the conventional ways of thinking about change and its management. Chapter 3, Project 3 focuses on my experiences in leading a group of donor partners in seeking to reform agriculture research institutions in Southern Africa. In that experience, I discuss how taking development aid as a social object enabled and constrained interaction between my team and our interlocutors. I discuss how change emerges from what people do together in their daily human relationships. Chapter 4, Project 4 looks at continued changes in my department and brings out the amplified political behaviours within staff members and management. These political behaviours contrasted sharply with civil service code and conventional management theory, especially as both reject the role of political behaviour in management. Chapter 5 presents a synopsis of my four



projects, the themes and arguments that have emerged from my research and my conclusion. In this chapter, I also present the methodology and method that I have used in this research. It ends with some generalizable ideas coming out of the research and my contribution to practice.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **Project 1**

### **Understanding the world around me**

Tracing back my footsteps and taking a closer look at my experiences in life is now shedding more light than I could ever get from official records on who I am and where I have come from. An aerial view of key events in my life had always given me an illusory sense of a linear progression from primary education through to university, adulthood and working life. That is only part of the story and hardly explains who I am and how I understand the world around me. I am taking a fresh look at my life through a magnifying glass in a way that is bringing closer a number of things that I had never paid attention to. I am learning far much more from my life experiences than I had ever thought I could.

Born and brought up in a countryside village in an African country, my early socialisation was collectively and simultaneously shaped by a wide range of ideologies and discourses. Chief among them were the church teachings, traditional and cultural values, contemporary national political conflicts and struggle for independence from colonial rule. My primary education in the 1970s coincided with the last decade of colonial rule in the Southern African country and the racial segregation policies of the colonial system. I am to that extent, a product of the colonial system and its educational policies. My father was always vocal against the excesses of the colonial army and on many occasions got detained for weeks and received brutal treatment. The end of the 1970s marked the most intense part of the struggle for independence but also shaped my view of the role of power and how violence plays a part in deciding who holds that power.

Christian bible and church teachings introduced me to the world of morality and the importance of moral boundaries, family norms, fairness, purity of character and intentions, respect for authority and my parents and older people more generally, good relationships in accordance with the ten commandments of the bible, and

avoiding conflicts and hurting others, being considerate and compassionate. While the political conflict and struggle for independence exposed me to the issues of unfairness, injustice and lack of freedom and links with poverty in society, the bible taught me the values of forgiveness and good neighbourliness, and typically to be humble, meek and turn the other cheek if your enemy struck you on the cheek. I was to pick more of the issues of unfairness, justice and human conflict during my later studies of history and divinity in high school.

With the advent of political independence, I found myself in high school at a time when the political conflict issues had now given way to reconciliatory messages of hope, peace, hard work and prosperity. I started to learn and understand the meaning and need for social order as a basis for building a better future for people. My sense of order and predictability was getting sharpened. After all, I was beginning to see the benefits of order in society based on how our world is organised. I thought the world of science had already given us the benefit of order in our physical world in many aspects of our lives. For example, we had days and nights, decades, years, months, weeks, days, hours and seconds to measure time, we had north and south, east and west to give us directions, we had money to measure the value of goods and services. These units of measurement, after all, help us to plan, measure and construct some trajectories in many facets of human life in ways that enable us to predict part of the future and minimise or eliminate undesirable outcomes.

Throughout my secondary and university education, my sense of order was growing and being consolidated by various studies that I undertook. My study of history pointed out the dangers of conflict between states and attempts to settle differences using war. The creation of League of Nations after the First World War in the 1920s and the United Nations after the Second World War confirmed to me the need for a world order based on shared rules of behaviour. History was littered with lessons of conflicts that were settled via negotiations and political settlements that included new constitutions and other media for resolving disputes. These lessons taught me the importance of creating order and orderly ways of dealing with unacceptable behaviour among individuals, groups and societies.

My study of accountancy at University was the peak of my socialisation on the subject of order. The meticulous attention we paid to balancing the books could only be compared with the natural regularity of sunrise and sunset. Planning and control became the watch words in my life. Fundamentally, lack of planning became the first step towards failure, and without planning, one could not measure progress and without the ability to measure, you could not possibly manage or get the desired results. Budgets gave us greater control over the future and we had to be prudent in anticipating revenue while being generous with anticipated expenditure. We worked within well established accounting conventions, principles, policies, rules and procedures in order to be comparable and consistent. We had to provide trial balances and balance sheets to ensure the accounts gave a complete, accurate, reliable position on a timely basis.

Furthermore, my encounter with commercial law and the spirit of free enterprise, taught me that the world needs an environment of rule of law and fairness in order to grow. That means we need just laws and rules and roles, rights, responsibilities, obligations, duties and powers to be clearly defined to enable people to plan and implement their plans with minimum uncertainty. In addition, we also need fair and impartial institutional framework to mediate over disputes and unacceptable behaviour. My first job as an officer in a Ministry of Finance reinforced the idea of authority and the importance of complying with set rules. However, in understanding this world order, I never questioned the human power relations and who sets the rules and on what basis.

Finally, my studies of strategic management when I was pursuing my Masters in Business Administration (MBA) reinforced my view of an orderly world in which long term business planning and effective short term tactical moves are critical for growing our businesses. To that extent, I could therefore claim to be a child of the society and institutional framework in which I grew up. My socialisation around the world of order and predictability neatly dovetails into the strategic management discourse in which the goal is to plan ahead and minimise uncertainty as well as avoiding undesirable outcomes in our endeavours. I took this world of order as given and one that regulates human behaviours and ways of making sense.

## **Order and world of management**

While my own experiences provide me with a better understanding of who I am and how I make sense of my world, in project 1 the question that I am asking myself is: how does the world of order arise and in what ways does it fit into daily human experiences.

I start with a view that within organisational settings, part of the world of order in human lives can be explained using theories of management. Management itself has a long history and I argue, can be best understood as a history of human relationships and how they arise from the social. In historical and conceptual terms, management today seems to be understood as a universal field of practice in which, if certain basic principles, theories and thoughts are applied in executing tasks, pre-set objectives can be achieved with certainty. Management is seen as involving the systematic interaction of people, money, machines, materials, methods and markets through processes that are thought to lead to desired outcomes. The classical approach of scientific management of Taylor (1856-1915), and Fayol (1841-1925) set the early foundations of modern management and helped to create benefits of efficiency but was also seen as fostering exploitative human relationships. The approach focused narrowly on accomplishing tasks without paying sufficient attention to human relationships and conditions.

Some of the criticisms of the classical approach were answered by Mayo (1880-1949) who brought in human relations theory of management. He viewed human relationships and underlying conditions as critical determinants of effective management and productivity. However, even today questions still remain on the human relations approach, particularly around the assumption that is often made that satisfied employees necessarily increase productivity. The human relations perspective is giving rise to new ways of understanding management and my research focuses on the role of human agents in management practice. I recognise that both the classical and the human relations theories have significantly shaped management theory since early in the 19th century.

In part due to the continued criticism of the classical and human relations theories of management, additional thinking led to the development of systems approach to management. The systems approach brought in quantitative and mathematical models built around organisational systems. Under this approach each subsystem is seen as deriving strength by its association and interaction with other sub-systems. As a result, the overall outcome is seen as more than the sum total of individual contributions. An organisation is seen as an open system that exhibits a holistic character. My view is that this approach also has fundamental weaknesses including that it is too abstract and vague in some cases. It is difficult to apply it to some practical problems directly and easily, for example, in service or public service organisations. The systems theory/approach and its tools and techniques fail to provide clear explanations on the reality of management for the practicing executives/managers who manage public sector organisations. It fails to clearly identify the nature of interactions and interdependencies between and among human agents in organisations as well as the external environment.

In my view, the classical, the human relations and systems approaches provide useful ways of explaining current management rhetoric and theory, but are not sufficient to understand the reality of management practice, particularly in governmental organisations. I am arguing that we can gain a better understanding of reality of management practice by paying attention to daily human relationships and the environment that individuals co-create for each other.

I will look at some contributions of a few writers that I think significantly shaped the subject of management. Early contributions came from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*<sup>1</sup>, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC in which he wrote about military strategies and the organising and leadership role of the commander. These military strategies have been adopted as business and managerial strategies in the last few centuries. Niccolo Machiavelli in *The Prince* in 1513 wrote about how rulers can hold power by being ruthless and presenting themselves as being other than what they are. He believed that rulers could employ cruelties

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<sup>1</sup> [Librivox](#) recording of The Art of War by Sun Tzu, translated by Lionel Giles.

which are done once for all under necessity of self-preservation, and are not afterwards persisted in, but so far as possible modified to the advantage of the governed. Machiavelli, N. (1992) p23

Although he wrote his book with respect to State governance, over the years, Machiavellian ways of thinking have manifested themselves in management practice. Adam Smith's book *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776 also significantly impacted the subject of management. His concept of division of labour as a natural basis on which humans could organise themselves and derive improved quality and productivity struck a chord in management thinkers and practitioners. Frederick W. Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911 introduced the principles of scientific management, in which he argued that the true interests of the owners/employers and employees are one and the same. He postulated that prosperity for the employer cannot exist in the long term unless it is accompanied by prosperity for the employee, and vice versa. Taylor thus focused attention to giving the workman what he most wants - high wages, while giving the employer a low labor cost for his business. Taylor's primary focus on productivity influenced the development of management in many respects. Peter Drucker's *Concept of Corporation* in 1946 took the subject of management a step further. He developed a number of management tools such as "management by objectives" (MBO) and argued for decentralised management in which central managers tell divisional managers what to do but not how to do it. Thompson and Strickland (1999), both of the University of Alabama present us with more recent tools on management. They have published a book with a large collection of concepts and case studies on strategic management. They have carefully set out key steps involved in strategic management from strategy-making tasks through to implementing the strategy. They define strategy as

a company's game plan that management has for positioning the company in its chosen market arena, competing successfully, pleasing customers, and achieving good business performance. Thompson, A. A. and Strickland, A. J. (1999) p2

Thompson and Strickland contend that there are five interrelated managerial tasks of strategic management. They identify the five tasks as:

- Forming a strategic vision of what the organisation's future business make will be and where the organisation is headed
- Setting objectives – converting the strategic vision into specific performance outcomes for the organisation to achieve
- Crafting a strategy to achieve the desired outcomes
- Implementing and executing the chosen strategy efficiently and effectively
- Evaluating performance and initiating corrective adjustments in vision, long term direction, objectives, strategy, or implementing in light of actual experience

Carpenter et al (2009) give us the planning, organising, leading and controlling (POLC framework) to represent management functions. The organising is understood as covering the organisational development, culture and human relations. The leading is seen as representing leadership, decision-making, communications, team building and employee motivation, while the controlling is understood as encompassing organisational systems and flow of resources.

When I take these writers' perspectives, I see management as a task driven process in which humans are directed by managers with power to regulate and control other humans for pre-determined outcomes. Which leads me to ask the question: what is the actual behaviour of individuals as human agents in these management processes?

## **Experience of change and its management**

### **Work context**

I had always believed that order and stability are sufficient conditions for management success. I was taught that nothing stays the same and that unless change was planned ahead, one could always be at risk of becoming a victim of



change. Reflecting on my very first job helps me to understand how my own ways of thinking has moved. Back then, I came to understand that organisations go through a life cycle like all other forms of life systems. I saw my organisation as an organised system in which we were subject to the same rules of the system. I thought we all acted in good faith and put organisational needs and objectives ahead of our own. I trusted those who were vested with authority to use that authority wisely. I was willing to play my part. I understood organisational rules, policies, procedures and values as neutral and sufficient to guide human behaviour towards stated objectives. Organisations had adequate rules to deal with unacceptable behaviour of staff. I believed that organisational structures clearly set out authority and responsibility levels for all staff. Job descriptions defined our respective individual roles. Senior managers developed the organisational vision, objectives and the necessary strategies for moving the organisation forwards, whilst we had the task of operationalising the strategy within set rules and allocated resources. That is how I understood my work environment, when I started working.

I worked for a Ministry of Finance in a national government of a developing country for five years and for much of that time, my colleagues and I were struggling to cope with planning and implementing an economic structural adjustment programme (ESAP). I participated in the major components of this strategic change project and experienced first hand the complexities of making organisational changes. I was a team member of efficiency units that reviewed the structure of government and the relevant mandates of each ministry in relation to world best practices. In this project, just as my team finalised a draft report proposing well reasoned and costed technical changes, we were summoned to the office of the highest political office to be told that we were going beyond our terms of reference. I was frightened. I had not expected such a response, not least from that political office. I realised that while we may have had technical power to identify problems and recommend appropriate changes, we simply did not understand the political context of our workplace. Looking back now, I can see how power relations shaped this reality. Michel Foucault (1976) helps me to understand this experience, particularly his discussion of how incorporation of power into the bureaucracy becomes necessary to control people. I found that power in this instance tilted heavily in favour of the political leaders, who chose to defend their

own interests. I did not see any space for speaking up or fighting the head of state and government. As I reflect on this, I was afraid of the consequences of such action. As Foucault posits, power works as a repression to our natural instincts and in contemporary society this is trotted out through the definition of discourses, as in, there are things you can and cannot say in a particular society.

My own permanent secretary Elijah had appeared to support our report throughout the consultations and drafting without any sign of disagreement. As it turned out, our summoning to the political office followed similar behind the scenes meetings between Elijah and other permanent secretaries. Our recommended changes were going to result in loss of at least four permanent secretary and four ministerial positions. I realised that there were deep seated political interests and powerful forces who felt threatened by the ESAP project and those who felt this way started to mobilise resistance against the proposed changes. They embarked on a crusade to discredit the entire change programme as an imposed solution with no prospects for success. The politicians and senior managers were prepared to renege on the ToRs that they had earlier signed for. I and a few others quickly saw the writing on the wall – that the change process was ill-fated. My experience taught me that public pronouncements of those in leadership often do not reflect their real objectives and desires. I realised that change was only accepted by the politicians to the extent that it did not jeopardise their interests and relationships. I recognised the future was bleak especially given that our working conditions, particularly salaries, were already way below the market rates as a result of the failure to balance the public budget and the size of the bureaucracy. I shared my sense of frustration with work colleagues but we all realised the constraints imposed by a myriad of interests. For me it was time to move on.

Power is in relation to others

My frustration in the Ministry of Finance arose from what I thought was abuse of power by the politicians and how I saw this creating unfair power relations within honesty and hardworking civil servants. I was in a powerful government and yet I felt powerless in relation to others in the government. As I think about this, I now

understand why Foucault (1994) is also critical of the role of the state in power relations. He says:

The state is envisioned as a kind of political power that ignores individuals, looking only at the interests of the totality or, I should say, of a class or group among the citizens. Foucault, M. (1994) p332

However, when I moved on from the national government to an International Management Consulting firm, I felt that although I was now receiving a better pay package, I had lost literally all sense of power that I had experienced in my previous job. Whereas I used to make decisions in government that affected the entire nation, I was now limited to making proposals and recommendations for my senior managers on very small issues. I experienced an emotional loss of power in the substance of my work. To my mind, this is a very interesting dimension of power. Foucault explains this feeling by saying that:

If we speak of power of structures or mechanisms of power, it is only in so far as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others. Foucault, M. (1994) p337

Nevertheless, I accepted the trade off between losing power and substance in my job and getting a better pay package. I also started to enjoy the more professional outlook of my new position and the meaning of it in the eyes of my friends and family. I suffered the loss of power inside me but felt happy that it was more than offset by the public recognition that I now enjoyed. I was now entitled to a company car, medical insurance and holiday package. My colleagues that I left in government would always acknowledge my presence and admire my new social status, without perhaps understanding that I was also feeling deflated for the loss of power. The conclusion I reach from this experience is that power is always in relation to others.

## **International development agency**

I was confident that some of the frustrating experiences I had had in my previous jobs would be absent in my new job. Much of the experience was around difficult colleagues, selfish bosses or politicians interfering with what I considered my professional work. My new position was in a British international development agency whose purpose is to use development aid to lead the world at national and international levels in eradicating extreme poverty.

My initial reaction was that Ministers and senior managers in my new work environment exhibited the greatest commitment to getting things right. Sitting in a country office, I was always fascinated by the constant references to Ministers' positions and the need to be accountable to the British taxpayer. This contrasted sharply with my experience in my first job in a developing country national government where politicians were much less worried about the views of taxpayers. I witnessed growth in the size of the country office which had now become the regional office for four countries in Southern Africa.

Besides focusing on delivering aid outcomes, the office always emphasised the importance of creating fair and open systems for dealing with staff. There was a programme to manage diversity mainly because the office was home to both local and UK-recruited staff. I was a fairly senior local adviser in the office and quite often, I found myself caught up between the dictates of the UK-based colleagues and the demands and complaints of local staff. As an adviser I had managerial responsibilities, which entailed that I had to project management views, and yet as a local staff member I had to be sensitive to the demands and complaints of local staff, some of which I also shared. It was always a difficult act to balance the demands on my position. My job also entailed taking a very critical view on the policies, behaviours and conduct of the national partner government against its international and national obligations. As a citizen of that developing country, raising critical questions about these transgressions left me vulnerable from a security point of view.

I thought my socialisation did well to help me cope with these demands. I found myself digging deep in my experiences to draw out conflict management skills, peace building and conciliation skills, and most importantly building positive and productive relations with other staff and parts of the national government. I convinced myself to pursue a professional line and be firm and fair in my judgement of the policies and behaviours of the partner country government. Over a period of 6 years the partner government increasingly became more antagonistic and oppressive, and thereby making my position much more difficult to maintain. As a national working for a donor country, I had to maintain a critical line about the deteriorating situation at a personal risk to myself. I always felt that my movements in that country were being monitored by the government security services. I had to be careful not to raise my head above the parapet. Performing my professional duties was now being constrained by the deteriorating wider political environment.

#### Wave after wave of changes

Meanwhile, in the UK it appeared that the electorate had voted for change towards the turn of the millennium, but the actual scope, magnitude and duration of the change was now in the hands of the political leaders in office. To my mind, this came through as another key lesson about social change. I learnt that change often comes as a package with all its known and unknown baggage. Only the people who enjoy greater power in the relationships seem to know what they want from the change process.

Since I joined, my department experienced waves of changes that largely coincided with changes in Ministers and Permanent Secretaries and changes in senior managers. Watching from the terraces and also as a participant, it was as if I was looking at stones being randomly thrown into a pool and setting off ripples or waves in different directions. Some waves from different stones collided and collapse, while others combined to form bigger waves and so forth. Some of the changes were starting at different points within the organisation and clashing and combining here and there. Others fortuitously combined to create bigger impacts and so forth.

The first wave of major change was from 2002 when the department got a new permanent secretary. He decided that the then policy departments which were run on sector basis were to be integrated into a single division with short term flexible, multi-skilled policy teams. This created shocks within the departments because it was seen as leaving a whole layer of senior managers who were running these departments with very little authority and substance in their jobs. One of these senior managers fought tenaciously against the changes and lost the fight and had to resign.

I was now based at HQs and sitting much lower in the organisational hierarchy. A thick cloud of uncertainty was now hanging over traditional power bases. At my lower level, I did not feel that my position was particularly threatened. Most managers were left anxious as to what would become of them and whether or not they would keep their jobs or be moved elsewhere. I felt that it was a “change” that seemed to be shaking everybody from their comfort zone and thereby effectively enabling the new boss to take control of the organisation much faster and with less resistance.

Not surprising, the department also announced opportunities for staff at various grades to be allowed to take early retirement if they so wished. Simultaneously, young talented staff were identified and strategically placed to corporately drive the change agenda. The performance management system was changed to include rewarding change management skills. The message that management wanted staff to get was that you would be better off flowing with the current than against the tide. Reflecting on these developments, I find resonance in Foucault (1994)’s postulation that:

Power relations are exercised, to an exceedingly important extent, through the production and exchange of signs; and they are scarcely separable from goal directed activities that permit the exercise of power such as training techniques, processes of domination, (*and other*) means by which obedience is obtained. Foucault, M. (1994) p338

It appeared that the fear and sense of powerlessness created in staff actually enabled top management to have a stronger say in where the change process was going and how it was to be done.

#### Self interests constraining change

The other major change process involved deciding how a central research department (CRD), a department in the Policy and Research Division should be run. The key issues during these changes in CRD were that there was no water tight case for changing the status quo and nobody was clear about what the future should look like. Senior CRD management were less than pro-active in developing options for the top management and tended to ask open ended questions on where and how things should go. Top management responded by making remarks that were often taken as instructions on how to proceed. CRD management were caught up between the demands of staff to get a clear picture about the future and confusing messages coming from the top management. Looking back, I could argue that CRD management failed to articulate the scope of the change process and appeared less keen on taking leadership responsibility. They were happy to sail in the direction of the wind.

At different times, I participated in organised change teams as a way of influencing the change process. I joined a team of colleagues whose role was to provide feedback to management about the change process. My own reading of the situation was that a senior CRD manager had already secured a new post elsewhere in the organisation and therefore was not keen to rock the boat. She wanted to paint a picture of a very successful change project within CRD before leaving. Consequently, views divergent from those of senior managers were rarely welcomed by this departmental head who evidently, tended to listen to her bosses above than her own teams below. For example, some decisions that had not been identified through the strategy consultation process started emerging from the senior managers' meetings. It turned out these decisions were reflecting the wishes of top managers. Staff members were then required to retrofit the decisions into the strategy implementation. Efforts to open discussions on these matters were unsuccessful. The staff frustrations were let out through corridor gossips and

informal chats in the kitchens. Those who had access to privileged information became the centres of attention and gained informal power. Staff placed more reliance on their informal networks to gain the truth of what was going on, while official communication was viewed with suspicion.

I had agreed to help with soliciting views from various teams and work with a consultant to prepare for a planning day to focus on the way forwards. It became quite clear to me that the actual expectations from staff were not being seen as in line with senior management's views. At the planning day, a top manager came to speak and literally ignored the presentations that my colleagues and I had prepared based on staff consultations. The message that staff got from the change process was that the staff consultations and participation were not sincere or done in good faith. After the planning day, staff increasingly looked for social networks at work from where they obtained the latest information about top management and what was going on at the work place. I joined the informal network of other professional advisers with access to senior managers to get a sense of what was going on and take appropriate responsive strategies.

### **Making sense of my own experiences of the change processes**

What I am experiencing in my mind is an intense questioning of some of my own views built from my early life experiences and the formal training that I received from the educational systems. The world of order and predictability that I have held for a long time is being severely challenged and tested by my own experiences of the workplace. Chia (2006) brings our attention to this divide between the world of order and that of complexity. In a way that mirrors my own socialisation, Chia highlights how the modern society tends to proclaim that things have their rightful places, whether within the biological organism or in the social field. He sees processes in which slow and complex evolutionary formation of modes of thought, codes of behaviour, social manners, dress, gestures, postures, the rules of law, ethical codes and disciplines of knowledge as nothing but ways of orienting us towards acceptable and yet socially constructed order. Quoting Schoenwald, (1973), Chia wrote that:



Industrial society rests on order; order means everything in its place; dirt is whatever is not where it should be; ... then a society bent on order should put the body into order by putting order into the body; society gains order by training. Chia, R. (2006) p231

Chia argues that even today, the logic of social organisation is moulding people towards a particular order. He contends that this sense of order is inculcated into minds from childhood, through for example, how a child has to undergo training on when and where to excrete. This view of order resonates well with my socialisation and experiences of my early working career. My experience confirms that society actually gains something through training people towards order, but there is a danger that that sense of order may serve to hide a number of issues such as power in human relationships.

In contrast, Stacey (2007) proffers a complex responsive process perspective as a way of thinking about the social interactions within strategic management. He uses the complex responsive process perspective to provide a deeper way of understanding some of the reasons why strategy implementation tends to be less successful. Mead (1934)'s theories on symbols, gestures and core values and how these are idealised and made into social objects for purposes of influencing the behaviour of the individual, groups and society are opening new perspectives of looking at the challenges of strategy implementation. Mead is shedding light into the workings of the mind and how this plays out in shaping the individual as well as the society in which he or she is part and vice versa. This iterative relationship between the mind, the individual and society occurs in very complex, non-linear and unpredictable ways that make it almost impossible to predict or control their effect on human relationships and ultimately the strategic change processes. I am beginning to appreciate the nature of and extent to which social interaction is more appropriate as a basis for explaining the limitations of implementing strategies in organisations. The theories around social interaction and complex responsive processes are helping me in explaining and understanding the difficulties associated with blue print strategic plans in my department. While the traditional approaches would explain failed strategies at the levels of resistance, poor communication and

lack of shared vision, the new sociological perspectives go deeper into looking at more relevant and closer aspects reality of management.

Stacey, (2007, 2010)'s perspectives help me to understand that much as strategic planning is meant to achieve pre-determined outcomes, the continuous iterations among humans agents during implementation create elements of unpredictability and non-linear behaviours within the strategy activities and processes. Stacey argues that long term planning in chaotic systems is not only difficult, but is essentially impossible because of the small disturbances that multiply over time. He contends that:

The science of complexity also provides a framework for bringing together into an alternative perspective a number of disparate ideas (paradox, circular causality, positive feedback, creative destruction, spontaneous self-organisation, emergence) that are to be found outside the most well-established perspectives of the strategy processes. Stacey, R. D. (2006) p93

Levy (2006) strengthens this way of thinking by making a distinction between social and physical systems. He highlights that in the physical world, unpredictability arises due to many iterations, non-linearity, and our inability to define starting conditions with infinite precision. In social systems, on the other hand, far less accuracy is possible in defining starting conditions and specification of the system structure itself is much less precise. Levy adds that physical systems are shaped by unchanging natural laws, whereas social systems are subject to intervention by individuals and organisations. He makes sense of these differences by invoking the chaos theory in which there are complex, non-linear and dynamic relationships. Levy sees firms interacting with each other and with other actors in their environment, such as consumers, labour, governments and banks in complex ways that impact on the strategy.

I invoke perspectives from Elias, (1991) and Mead, (1934) and other writers to seek to understand human relationships in my department. Elias' view is that one must start from the structure of the relations between individuals in order to understand the "psyche" of the individual person. A powerful base upon which he makes his

argument is that one cannot take a single individual as one's starting point in order to understand the structure of their relationships to each other and the structure of society. I explore this argument in detail in Project 2.

## **Conclusion**

My initial views of what a workplace should look like have been seriously challenged and I seek to find ways of understanding my experiences of working in organisations. The order that I have sought in my work environment has not always materialised. What I have experienced are complex changes in the organisations that I have worked and that these changes have neither followed a clear and rational plan nor delivered the pre-determined outcomes. I have experienced ever changing human relationships in which power has been continuously shifting. My trust in people has tended to be misplaced on numerous occasions. How do I make sense of these experiences? How is this affecting my actual practice and relationships at work?

From my experience, the real challenge is to find ways of understanding that which is unknowable about human agents. Human behaviour is one dynamic element which even at an individual level is difficult to know in advance, particularly how it would respond to different social stimuli. It is even more difficult to predict human behaviour arising from iterative and interactive processes. And yet, human interactions are not given specific attention in the strategic management process. It is this single factor of human interaction that makes strategic management significantly different from the process of planning and building a house.

These behaviours of human agents bring unknowable elements to human experience. Speaking in the context of a war, the former United States of America Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld underlined the significance of the unknown in making decisions when he said,

Reports that say something hasn't happened are interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some

things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns — the ones we don't know we don't know. Internet (2006)

The way I understand this statement is that no matter the state of preparation in strategic management, there is always the risk of the unknown factors, arising from human behaviour. I would argue that strategic management is like the preparation and execution of a war in which you don't quite know how the opponent and the natural environmental factors will respond to your own manoeuvres and forays. The role of human agents remains the greatest challenge in knowing, let alone planning and controlling what is going to happen. The role of human interactions in management is thus an issue for further research in my next project. The key issues will include using the complex responsive process perspective to explore non-linearity and unpredictability of human behaviour.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Project 2**

#### **Strategy implementation and managerial control: my experience**

In Project 1, I explored my process of socialisation and how that made me a stickler for order, constantly searching for strategic planning and managerial control tools with which to establish that order.

In this paper, I enquire and reflect on my experience and the practice of strategy development and implementation within my work place. I want to understand the extent to which strategy implementation is a technical, rational, formal and orderly process in which managers take control and deliver pre-determined outcomes. I am arguing that, on the contrary, strategy development and implementation is messy, and is characterised by ‘complex responsive processes’ (Stacey, 2007) in which local human interactions determine the overall pattern that is the strategy. I will particularly explore the role of power in its various forms during these social interactions and how that enables and constrains human action that shapes the reality that is strategy implementation.

In this narrative, I also recognise that my way of thinking is gradually shifting. I started from the dominant management discourse and mainstream systems based management practices that characterised my training and early career. My university training inculcated a systems-based way of thinking about management in me. Systems-thinking focuses on the whole, not the parts, of a complex system. It concentrates on the interfaces and boundaries of components, on their connections and arrangement, on the potential for holistic systems to achieve results that are greater than the sum of the parts (Senge, 1990). The systems approach views organisations as processes in a system consisting of several subsystems that are interconnected to each other by procedures. Subsystems are responsible for carrying out work smoothly in the system as a whole, by various interlinked procedures. However, this does not seem to fully explain my experience at my

work place. I realise that this way of thinking misses the actual and critical human relationships that shape the whole. According to Senge (1990):

Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots. Senge, P. (1990) p68<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental weakness of this way of thinking in social settings is that it misses or makes questionable assumptions about the reality that makes up the whole. My view is that individual human relationships always exist with or without management systems and as such, those systems can only operate within the context of those existing and emerging human relationships. Stacey (2007) helps me mount a challenge to this way of thinking by bringing to our attention the point that the dominant management discourse is based on a range of assumptions about organisations and people in those organisations. These assumptions include the view that organisations behave as systems that are external to the individuals that form and control them; that individuals exist at different levels while organisations exist at a higher level; that individuals are the primary units and that they are autonomous to their social environment; and that as the individuals exist outside the organisational system – they can plan, design, and control the movement of the organisational system.

My objective in this project is to test these assumptions using my experiences at my work place. I also begin to explore an alternative discourse based on complexity theories to make sense of that experience. While the dominant management discourse claims that organisations behave as systems, Stacey takes the view that an ‘organisation is conversation and organisation and strategy emerge through conversations’ (Stacey, 2007 p270) and as such, managers and staff are part and parcel of these conversations. I follow these conversations around power relations in my organisation as they take place at various levels including, individuals, groups of individuals, teams, professionals, community of organisations, nation states and international agencies as I try to make sense of it all.

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<sup>2</sup> Senge, P. M., *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*, Doubleday, NY, 1990, p68.

## **Strategy and power to control**

I begin by acknowledging a view espoused by Thompson and Strickland (1999) and widely held in management literature that a strategy is a game plan developed and implemented by management. However, my question is how is the game planned and played out in reality. I respond to the question by testing the notion that managers have power to decide what the future (vision) should look like and that they control the process of implementing the strategy by moulding employee behaviours. I also bring in the concept of power from a sociological point of view where relationships are seen as reflecting relatively equal or nearly equal measure in terms of constraining and enabling human action. Foucault (1977) believed that:

power is everywhere....because it comes from everywhere and it reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes. Foucault, M. (1977) p27

The meaning I get out of this is that each person in a human relationship has power to influence the other at the same time that the other will be doing so. Power is shared and negotiated as individuals and groups of individuals relate to each other. The process of negotiating and sharing power is what determines the reality in their eyes. Similarly strategy implementation involves these human relationships and is best seen as part of on-going organisational change; change in conversations - characterised by continuous iteration of selves of the interdependent people who are members of the organisation (Stacey, 2007)

If all human relationships are constrained and enabled by their power relations and that these power relations are continuously shifting as individuals and groups interact, how do we explain managerial control. My experience of working for an international development aid department has given me new perspectives that resonate with the views of Stacey and Foucault. As will be further argued, organisations are intricately linked to and shaped by the presence of individuals, groups and networks who collectively and as individuals interact in complex ways that shape each other and simultaneously, the reality that emerges from and about the organisation. My narrative will explore these complex interactions. I am

seeking to make sense of the role of various concepts such as control, values, norms, diversity, conflict, rules, interests and anxiety that characterise the social interaction that largely shapes reality in organisations.

### **Environment that people form for each other**

As I had planned, I moved to my department's Head Quarters in the United Kingdom to take up a post in the Policy Division. The managers delayed sending me the necessary documents to enable me to travel earlier and so I only had five days including a weekend to secure a house to rent and start work on the Monday. While looking for a house to rent, I had to think about the implications for school places for my children and transport to work. Coming from outside the United Kingdom, fitting into the unfamiliar life in London raised great anxiety in me and my family. The people, the culture, the attitudes, the neighbours, the teachers, shops, language and accents all seemed to represent differences that left questions in my mind as to how my family would relate to them.

My new managers had promised to send me my contract by email but it still had not come. It was the document at the top of the list demanded by estate agents for me to get a house to rent. Finally, my contract arrived, but only with two days before starting work. It took me a great deal of pleading with estate agents, use of less than factual testimonials from friends and a colleague's address as our previous address in order to secure a house. Contrary to what I had been advised before departure, I had to use less than honest testimonials that eventually found favour with the strict staff working for the estate agents to get a house. It was ironical that they were too strict such that I could not tell them the truth and instead gave them made-up tenancy testimonials which they were happy to accept. Introspectively, I am still wondering what I thought I was doing. According to Goffman (1959) I may have been participating in a "conscious performance" in which:

people provide a common performance to sustain a particular definition of a situation, this representing as it were, their claim to what reality is. Goffman, E. (1959) p90



Goffman goes further to say that:

When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term sincere to individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance. Goffman, E. (1959) p28

I understand Goffman to be saying that in a performance, one can either be sincere or cynical depending on how he/she relates to the audience. As I reflect on both Goffman's view and my behaviour, I conclude that I was being cynical of the behaviour of the estate agency staff. This suggests that people engage in various performances in life not so much out of choice, but as responses to gestures coming from those they interact with. If the estate agency staff had not been so strict, I would have remained truthful in my responses. The result was that I played out my part in response to the gestures I was receiving from the agency staff. This also reminds me of Shakespeare who in *Macbeth* told us that:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.  
Shakespeare, W. (2005) *Macbeth*, Act 5 Scene V.)

The way I make sense of Shakespeare's words in this scene and my own experience is that as individuals and groups, we all pass through life as actors who play their part. I saw myself playing my part in co-creating reality in which I interacted with estate agency staff for mutual benefit. The fact that my honest responses to estate agencies actually prejudiced me against securing a house enabled me to adjust my presentation. The real estate agency rules were playing into my behaviour by enabling me to shift positions as a direct response to the constraints I was experiencing from the rules. I was not being rewarded for being honest, but rather punished. My quick response was to use friends' addresses and testimonials which were less than factual but that behaviour was quickly rewarded. I saw this as a

successful performance in which the audience and the participants became happy. Much as I had planned the relocation and how my managers would facilitate that move, the reality that emerged in my experience was different from the plans.

### **New position and new relationships**

After an exhausting and frustrating process of organising accommodation for the family, I looked forward to a smooth start to my job. First day in the office, I checked in at the reception just before 0800 on a warm August morning. Although I had worked for my department for five years in country offices, the accreditation at Head Quarters made me feel like a stranger yet again. I had to provide details about myself all over again. I found myself irritatingly asking in my mind, what has happened to my details already in the department. My only consolation in this boring and elaborate process was that the ladies helping me wore bright and beaming smiles. They made me feel really welcome.

A few minutes after completing the registration details and obtaining my entry electronic pass, a lady who introduced herself as Maria showed up to lead me to my work station. With a great smile she said that she was my buddy to help me settle into my new team. At this point, I convinced myself that, my troubles of relocating had ended. I was now beginning to think about what my workload would look like. I probably had a different sense of reality from my colleagues. Coming from another office, the furtive glances and grinning smiles from colleagues in the open floor sitting area made me feel like a stranger and an outsider. I was probably an outsider but I just did not feel comfortable to think about myself as an outsider. I preferred to be very hopeful about my future. I wanted to belong to the organisation. Elias says:

the individual actually grows into a human network of people that existed before him, into a network that he helps to form....society is the society of interdependent individuals. Elias, N. (1991) p32

I was already part of the organisation and felt I had the power to shape and co-create the rest of my relationship with others. Elias reinforces this argument that as

an individual in the organisation, I am not entirely shaped by laws inside or outside of me. I am neither the beginning nor the end of a relationship with another person or group of persons but a product of the interplay of gestures and responses between me and the others. I felt that I was not going to be a stranger for much longer because I would blend into the new society. I was ready to do my part to deliver the departmental objectives. After all, my buddy had given me packs of files about what my new job entailed. My warm welcome into the team had made me feel energised for my work. Maria told me all about the social clubs, the tea clubs, the canteen meetings, the after work drinking sessions, the bar and introduced me to all the team members one by one. I saw my warm welcome from Maria and the receptionists as a gesture of acceptance into the team. I also understood the formal and informal structures of the organisation and how various symbols such as educational level were given recognition and provided basis for approval of one's views. Rituals and routines such as meetings to make collective team decisions are seen as a way of protecting individuals against risk of bad judgement. My recollection of the key events and senior officers of the past put me in good standing when engaged in conversations with colleagues.

### **Open floor sitting**

In my previous post, I had my own office and enjoyed some privacy. This time around, I found myself sharing a huge open space with my team and others. We sat so close to each other that every word of a telephone conversation was shared by others. It just looked so weird and obtrusive in my view. All teams sat in the open space, huddled in one corner or the other. Each one of us had a modest tiny desk and a four drawer accessory to accommodate a few files. A set of rules by order of management were posted strategically all over the building about sharing the open space. I recall a day when a colleague and I had to visit the toilet in order to share a small office gossip about how his application for leave had been turned down unexpectedly. It was about the only place we could find freedom to be our real selves and to talk about how we felt about office developments. Even then, we had to check that the toilet cubicles were also empty.

A policy of no files to be left on the desk was in operation and the justification was that our computers now stored all our data, including all communication and reports. No strong perfumes or strong curry dishes were allowed in the sitting area. Mobile phones had to be on silent and those answering them were to excuse themselves from the sitting area.

One day my colleague visited from another part of the building, and I had to stand up and lead him into the corridor to talk. Another morning, I got a phone call on my office telephone. It was coming from my bank where we had applied for a mortgage account. They were asking me a lot of my private life information which I felt really uncomfortable to answer in the presence of all those team members sitting around me. Even if they were not actually listening, it all looked like they were eavesdropping on my conversation. I had to ask the bank to call me on my mobile or at home at a later date to discuss. I was uncomfortable in this open set up. I felt embarrassed to share information about myself, lost my sense of importance and found it hard to trust everyone around me.

### **Rules and behaviour control**

It all brought back my memories from the days back at school when heads of schools wielded enormous authority and power that even in their absence, no student dared be seen breaking the rules that they had set. As I reflected on the meaning of these rules, I wondered what the managers wanted to achieve by imposing them on us. First, my socialisation told me that rules are required to create order and stability to enable managers and staff to deliver predetermined outcomes.

Looking at how staff in my organisation resented some of the rules, I also realised that in many ways, rules do constrain and enable individuals in human-relating. A number of staff in my organisation felt enabled in that the rules protect them from victimisation by management during the course of discharging their duties, but they also felt constrained when those rules are so rigid and unresponsive to emerging novel situations. March et al (2000) allude to this paradox of rules when they state that rules create 'bureaucratic stability and rigidity' while such rules also 'produce

elements of instability and change'. To further illustrate this paradox, March et al posit that:

modern formal organisations are characterised by their structured stable patterns of collective behaviour, sustained by and reflected in routines, procedures, conventions and other forms of rules. March, G. J. et al (2000) p8

I understand that this bureaucratisation is done partly to reduce uncertainty in the process of decision-making and increase compliance but perhaps more likely, for managers to gain control over the behaviour of people. I also recognised that my organisation has over a period of time, routinised a wide range of its daily activities into policies, project cycle management guidance, job descriptions and organisational charts as part of its primary instruments of coordination and control (March et al 2000).

### **Rules and performance**

The way I make sense of this is that rules can sometimes become a ritual. They are written down but not always followed because actual behaviour of an individual is not necessarily shaped by the rules. Instead, the individual's behaviour emerges from their local interaction with others as they relate to each other within organisations and society at large. When the rules are followed, people often do so with a highly calculated and conscious motive in terms of what they get out of it. My view is that such accepted rules are normally accompanied by incentive schemes to promote certain desired behaviours and this is where the dominant management discourse places emphasis during strategy implementation. It seems to me that the staff's responses of accepting the rule and incentive gestures are then interpreted by proponents of conventional management wisdom as the managers' actual control over strategy implementation. However, in other situations, rule-following occurs unnoticed because they have been internalised and become unconscious premises of action or have been incorporated into firmly established practiced routines (so called best practice) and procedures. Still in other cases, rules are glorified and supported as manifestation of organisational ideology, with

minimal application. Whichever way the rules are brought up or applied in an organisation, they convey a particular meaning to those who work with them.

I noted that corporate recognition is also bestowed on effective bureaucracies. In my department, for example, an *Investor In People* certification has been awarded every three years based on how the overall strategy is developed, shared, communicated and implemented at all levels within the organisation. This use of rules and formal systems to give public approval plays into the behaviour of senior managers, who then religiously enforce even more rules and systemic approaches to organisational management.

### **Power and human relating**

A month or so in my new post, I began to feel some tensions and frustration. I was assigned by my team leader to work on human rights alongside a colleague of the same grade as me. Sue was her name and she was given the privilege of coordinating the human rights work in the team. As we discussed the work plan and specific outcomes we needed to enter into our annual performance management forms, I could see her listening only to herself. Anything that I said, she conveniently found a reason to set aside. Reluctantly, I allowed her to have her way and the work plan was presented as a team work from the two of us. I did not protest or disagree but I was feeling unhappy inside me. I did not want to be seen as starting a conflict with her so soon. I played along in the game (Goffman, 1959). I kept on wondering to myself if this was how I was going to work for three more years. As I reflected on my relationship with Sue, I began to see her as domineering and selfish. I also realised that by keeping quite and playing along, I was inadvertently accepting her power over me and at the same time constraining myself in discharging my duties. I was co-creating a relationship in which I was disempowered. I recognised that power resided in both of us to enable and constrain our behaviours (Foucault, M. 1977).

Following a series of incidents, I took a decision to stand up to Sue. The final act of provocation came one day when Sue took my draft progress report and in a typical teacher style, started combing through it with her red pen. I could not take her

condescending attitude to me anymore. It had taken me a while to think about how to deal with Sue's behaviour. In the end, I trusted my human instinct to deal with the emerging relationship. My options were limited but I had to do something. Stacey argues that:

We are interdependent individuals and we can accomplish nothing without each other... we need each other for many different reasons – we need others to love and to hate; we need others to depend upon or rebel against; we need others to victimise or being victimised by Stacey, R. D. (2010) p181-182

Stacey gives me an entry point for understanding what went on in my relationship with Sue. The way I make sense of this is that as an individual in my organisation, I had not chosen to work with Sue and neither had she. That is the reality that I had to accept. One day I just went up to her and right in her face demanded, "Sue, we have got to talk". She looked up, a bit bewildered and blank. The rest of the team members sitting around us looked up with equal measure of surprise. For a whole minute, we were all quiet that one could hear the sound of pin drop. The air was expectant and Sue and I looked at each other in the eyes. "We have got to sit down and sort out how we want to work together. I cannot go on taking orders from you like a school child", I continued. Sue must have seen that I was seriously unhappy and any confrontational response from her would have produced some drama in public. She was quick to invite me to a private meeting room. I followed her into the room and closed the door behind me. "You don't like to work under a woman, do you?" Sue charged. I really felt insulted by that statement especially given that my previous three jobs, I had served loyally under women bosses without a problem. It became clear to me that Sue wanted to use the ideology of gender and power to cow me into submission. Although I was visibly angry with that baseless accusation, I had to play the "game" carefully.

### **Shared control and human interdependence**

I calmed down my nerves and sought to control the character and content of the conversation. I asked her to sit down and she took her seat and I deliberately took a seat next to her rather than opposite her. I asked her to listen to my side of the story

and by sitting next to her rather than opposite, I thought I was gesturing equality and non-confrontation. I told her that I was not happy with her behaviour and attitude towards me and that it was affecting my work. I pointed out that I did not have any problem working with or being led by a woman boss, citing my previous jobs. I indicated to her that I liked her as a person but found her manner of working disconcerting and stressing. In a magnanimous gesture, I invited her to reflect carefully on how we had worked together in the last few months to see what she thought about it. She smiled uncomfortably and looked at me. After a brief moment of silence and big sigh, she opened her mouth and said to me, "I am sorry". Sue regretted that things turned out that way and expressed her desire to turn the page and start a new chapter of working better together.

We both agreed that our work plan had fallen behind by two months as a result of the conflict between the two of us. We agreed to share the human rights work load with each one of us taking full responsibility for their own work. Sue and I made up and hugged each other with a promise to work together based on mutual respect and professionalism. We agreed on a plan to catch up with our work that had fallen behind.

The question is what does this mean for strategy development and implementation. It provides me with a strong basis for challenging the traditional view that managers have power to decide what will happen and to control how it will happen. If everyone has power in a relationship, how can it possibly be said that managers alone have power to control conversations in an organisation. Stacey contends that:

Organisations can be seen as population-wide patterns comprising collective identities ... and that complex responsive processes of human relating occur as the living present, the present we live in and are essentially local in nature, but it is from such local interactions that population-wide patterns or global or macro patterns emerge.....

novel global, population-wide forms emerge unpredictably in self-organising, that is local interaction, in the absence of any blueprint, programme or plan for the global, population-wide form. Stacey, R. D. (2007) p3,4)



Stacey's view gives me a more practical way of making sense of what was happening in my organisations on a daily basis. I began to see that managers' capacity to control was not unconstrained. Their power existed within the context of the local interactions and it is through their participation in these micro-activities that they gain opportunities for shaping the strategy and its implementation process.

Further reflecting on my relationship with Sue, I find resonance in Elias (1991)'s concept of malleability and adaptability. He says that human beings, unlike animals, owe their social moulding and behaviour to self-regulation in relation to others as they co-create reality. Sue and I were interdependent parts of the organisation in which we were co-creating our relationship and multiple realities. She tried to use the gender ideology to differentiate her world of reality from mine whereas I saw power as the factor that was at the centre of our relating. Elias (1991) views this human relating both at an individual or community level as people interacting within a continuum – in which tensions arise and generate an urge towards structural changes within the continuum. Sue and I found ourselves negotiating and re-shaping our relationship after I challenged her.

What happened between Sue and I had delayed implementation of our work plan by two months. Our interaction was directly responsible for forming the reality around the human rights policy implementation. The system based thinking would only focus on the whole and miss the local interactions which are critical components of the strategy. Stacey affirms this view on society or organisational behaviour when he says that:

Whereas the dominant discourse takes local interaction, micro and local levels as parts of the whole system, the alternative takes the view that the macro (population-wide or global) is continually emerging in the micro as individuals simultaneously form, and are formed by the social. Stacey, R. D. (2007) p5

Given the centrality of local interaction in organisational reality, I will explore this later in this narrative.

## **Human relating and International Development**

As I work for a state development agency, I have gained some interesting insights into strategy issues in big bureaucracies. My socialisation and belief in the formal power of institutions together convinced me that being part of the government gave the department institutional power to set rules and to regulate the behaviours of not just its own staff, but all other players including citizens and body corporate organisations. I read the enabling statute and got to understand that the department's legal mandate is to help the world reduce poverty while promoting economic growth in countries of the world. I found it hard to make sense of the fact that there should be so many people who are extremely poor in some parts of the world, while other parts are battling obesity and food waste. Even more confusing to me was why such poor people do not do something for themselves to move out of poverty. I came to understand that there are both man-made and natural conditions that drive people into poverty. My question then was on who could and should do something to move these people out of poverty. As I reflected on these questions, I realised the issues are not so straight forward as portrayed by many politicians. Ramalingam et al ponder the interconnectedness of development aid and world problems:

if it is convenient to try to solve real world problems as if they were merely isolated problems, rather than interconnected and part of a longer-term process, what kind of convenience are we talking about? Is it analytical, institutional, political or a combination of all three.....this perspective implies that it may be unlikely that international aid agencies will be able to incorporate a more holistic, complexity-oriented understanding of the delivery of assistance in the near future. Ramalingam, B. et al, (2008) p15

I understand Ramalingham to be challenging the idea that a group of donors and think-tanks can sit down and identify problems causing poverty and find solutions from their airy offices. Changing the conditions that cause poverty requires deep understanding of the 'environment that people form for each other' (Elias, 1991) in those poverty stricken places. Planning poverty reducing changes on the basis of rationality and linear causality may not be enough. And yet every three years or so

I, and all staff, in consultations with other government departments, other development partners, partner governments, and community based actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) participate in the development of my department White Paper on poverty reduction. Each White Paper is published as government policy, and acts as the Strategy for the department and hence the basis for marshalling resources, efforts and behaviours of its staff and partners. I believe there is an assumption made about a linear causal relationship between events and poverty, development aid and poverty reduction. Serrat, (2009) writing for the Asia Development Bank questions the traditional causal way of thinking that is dominant in development field.

when facing volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environments such as those that characterise development work, mono-causal explanations founded on rational choices, best specified top-down, are ever more recognised as inadequate, or at least insufficient. Serrat, (2009) p2

Buckle similarly questions the linear-causality thinking:

research has illustrated, at the heart of many disasters, there are seldom single causes but instead many interacting and interdependent dimensions and factors. Buckle, P. (2005) p196

Ramalingam, Serrat and Buckle leave us with serious questions: Do we know what causes poverty and does development assistance really provide a solution to poverty? How does complexity thinking help us understand global challenges in areas of poverty, security and economic growth? These are areas that still need further research in the world of development aid. However, based on my experience and the way I make sense of it, the import of what Ramalingam, Serrat and Buckle are saying is that there is a whole range of factors at play that interact in complex ways that cause poverty and as such solutions cannot possibly be understood on the basis of simple, linear causal thinking.

In the middle of all this reflection, I find myself at the heart of this ritual of strategy making in my department in which we focus on getting the White Paper document

published and implemented. To what extent can our White Paper act as a blueprint of how to tackle poverty in the world? I am puzzled. Can social change and human behaviour be planned and controlled entirely by use of formal institutional instruments and management tools? I reckon there are limits to how far the department can keep its own staff, let alone the rest of society within its rules governing behaviour. As various writers will point out, human behaviour is unique and is not simply shaped by a set of rules, but by a whole process of continuous interactions among humans. Fraser (1981) takes up Foucault's views on the use of institutional power and points out that:

power functions at the capillary level via a plurality of everyday micro-practices ....it operates at the lowest extremities of the social body in everyday social practices.... The capillary character of modern power concerns the inadequacy of state centred and economist political orientations. Fraser, N. (1981) p279

I reflect on Fraser's view of power and it connects with my experience. The way I make sense of power and my experience in the organisation is that effective engagement at all levels of human interaction raises opportunities for co-creating new forms of reality in which problems at work and in life, more generally can be solved. My file full of various departmental statutes, policies, procedures, rules and guidance notes with formal institutional power and authority to help with implementing the strategy also remind me of the limits of institutional power alone. I do understand that the rules of working carry serious weight and must be complied with at all times. However, do I think people positively respond to them? The dominant discourse would claim to rely on institutional and hierarchical power to control and direct human behaviour towards agreed organisational objectives. March et al (2000) state that rules reflect the history of an organisation and that social relations are regulated by rules. However, they also recognise that this involves interactions among individuals as they struggle for identity, social interpretations of reality and negotiations about appropriate ways to connect them. A similar view is shared by Stacey (2007), March et al (2000) and Elias (1991) that actual individual behaviour is a function of social interaction at micro levels where the "self" identity is shaped, while overall human-relating based on power patterns

itself into macro and population-wide realities in which development programmes function.

Nee et al argue that:

it is by structuring social interactions that institutions produce group performance, in such primary groups as families and work units as well as in social units as large as organisations and even entire economies. Nee, V. and Ingram, P. (1998) p19

It is this process of human relating which is repeated across organisations and society resulting in both planned and unplanned macro patterns, and these patterns emerge in often predictable and unpredictable ways; giving rise to spontaneous changes that ultimately reduces the so-called managerial control.

### **Reflections on International Development**

I realise there are efforts to carry out more research to fully understand the interface between global problems and development interventions. Much more needs to be understood on the complexity of development aid. I realise too that the term development aid has become a 'generalised idealisation' (Mead, 1934) of how the rich should help the poor to make life better for everyone. While there may have been a global consensus around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), there has been great debate on how to functionalise these ideals in very different local contexts. Terms such as MDGs and Human Rights have become 'reified symbols' (Stacey, 2007) of communicating and understanding the idealisation. These terms point out at how we abstract from our experiences and coin words that convey a particular meaning which we then employ in daily conversations and various reports as if they were things, rather than words that will make sense only to people who are familiar with the world of development.

I once attended meetings with development partners from poor countries in Southern Africa where an issue of who should set the development agenda and the rules thereof was raised. There was no solid response. I heard murmurings in the

margins of these official meetings in which the partners complained that the rules of the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the Bretton Woods Institutions among others, are set by and biased in favour of the developed countries.

Looking back and taking these conversations into account, I realise that strategy development and implementation in my department is more problematic than it was made out to be. Armed with rationally constructed logical framework (logframe) that set out the purpose of the human rights policy, the main objectives and the key outputs as well as the key activities and outcomes for each output, my team was convinced that we were now ready to cause the department and indeed partner countries and organisations to implement the human rights policy. My team adopted the blueprint approach whereby managers are seen as objective observers standing outside organisational systems and rationally constructing what the future should and would look like. Not only are managers seen as choosing that future, but also taking steps to make that future a reality by methodically setting in motion a series of activities that move the organisation towards intentional and pre-determined outcomes. However, my own experience tells me that local interactions, not just managerial control and hierarchical powers, ultimately shaped the reality of our human rights policy implementation.

Darcy and Hoffman equally warn that:

given the tendency of contract-based relationships (donor-recipient) to be evaluated against contracted input and output (logframe) rather than actual outcomes, there is a danger of circularity – i.e. problems are ‘constructed’ and ‘solved’ in ways that may bear little relation to actual needs. Darcy, J. and Hoffman, C. (2003), p32

## The importance of local context

My team had taken very little, if any, regard to the actual state of interplay among the people and organisations that were going to interact as local participants of the living present during policy implementation at various levels of our human networks. Stacey (2007) cautions that:

no super being or natural force can plan change of social order....change occurs in paradoxical transformative processes – change is self organising, emergent processes of perpetually constructing the future as continuity and potential transformation at the same time. Stacey, R. D. (2007), p250

Streatfield (2001) echoes Stacey's views and is very clear about the importance of the interplay among the local people involved in the implementation processes. He states that:

continuous complex interactive and communicative processes, with managers and staff using gestures and responses in the living present of organisations act in ways that transform and reshape reality. Streatfield, P. J. (2001) p130

I have come to understand development as a complex concept in which different people draw multiple meanings and proffer different solutions, depending on who they are and where they sit in human power relations. The way I now make sense of it is that instead of taking a blue print approach, development aid requires us to explore and understand local interactions at each level of our communities to find the most tractable meanings.

Failure to take account of social local realities in areas we provide aid seems to be the main weakness as far as my experience shows. Funtowicz and Ravetz (1994) assert that:

those who are being affected by aid initiatives need to be part of the process of identifying the important elements....as well as defining the problems and their solutions. Funtowicz, S. O. and Ravetz, J. (1994) p569

Elias (1991) alludes to state interdependence and how this constrains and enables collaboration and social change. He says that:

all these states are to a greater or lesser degree dependent on each other, whether economically, through the unilateral or mutual threat of violence or through the direct use of violence; or through the spread of models of self-control and other aspects of behaviour and feeling from certain centres, through the transfers of linguistic or cultural models, and in many other ways.

Elias, N. (1991) p164

These writers and their perspectives of social change provide me with a credible basis for framing my experiences and how I make sense of my organisation. By invoking these theories of social change and complexity thinking to explain how reality emerges from local interactions of human relating, and how that patterns into global or population-wide patterns, I am able to understand organisational change and strategy implementation better. Most critically, I see the change not as an entirely rationally constructed and hierarchy driven blueprint, but as a pattern of reality emerging from local interactions among individuals who make up the organisation. Elias posits that people have to and are still experiencing change and acquiring knowledge about what institutions to work with on these global agendas as they go along.

People cannot simply know, they have to learn what institutions they should create to deal with the problem of global integration, and in most cases they do not learn simply by objective thought process. Usually they learn by bitter experience. Elias, N. (1991) p167

I find myself drawing from history and adding the League of Nations after the First World War and the United Nations after the second World War as typically such institutions that emerged from lessons learnt by humanity. Both institutions were not rationally designed by objective bystanders – but arose from complex responsive processes of people trying to make sense of the tragic wars that saw millions of people dying and economies being ruined. I would submit that the



processes of forming these grand institutions were fraught with conflicts of ideology, diversity of values, protracted political negotiations, norms and self interests but probably held together by a strong sense of interdependence. Stacey points at an emerging pattern coming together on the basis of interweaving plans and spontaneous actions - emotional and rational, intended and unintended, friendly and hostile.

Even today, my department is still exploring ways of engaging the United Nations body with a view to creating dynamic conversations around greater effectiveness and voluntary compliance within international law and best practice. There is a growing realisation that the world's future prosperity and security does not depend on one country or a group of privileged countries, but the collective community of nations; shared values, norms and meanings right from the individuals to nation states.

### **Battle of professions**

I got involved with another part of the strategy; that is to get more poor people involved in the economic development of their countries. I invited comments from colleagues on the various drafts that I and my team had drafted. I got two categories of responses. One category comprised responses welcoming my cautious approach and some key questions that I posed, calling for more evidence. The other category comprised angry emails accusing me and some of my team members of wanting to stall progress in implementing the strategy by raising unnecessary questions and ignoring the existing evidence. What I find more interesting is the way in which people of different professional groups took positions in line with their training and socialisation. I kept on questioning the evidence that backed the policy instruments on cash transfers. I asked the team leader why we were making strong claims that social cash transfers contribute to economic growth without the necessary evidence base. His response was that it was part of our duty to lobby and canvass for such a policy. He even suggested that the evidence will emerge from some of the work we were already supporting in different countries. I discovered that some meetings organised to take forwards this agenda were now being held clandestinely (saw some emails calling for meetings in which our names were missing) in order to

exclude dissenting voices. Some of my emails and those of people who demanded greater debate on the issue were simply ignored by the team leader.

Goffman (1959) brings perspectives that help me reflect on my own behaviour and those of my colleagues. He says a team of people provide a common performance to sustain a particular definition of a situation, this representing as it were, their claim to what reality is. He goes further to say:

it seems to be generally felt that public disagreement among the members of the team not only incapacitates them for united action but also embarrasses the reality sponsored by the team. Goffman, E. (1959) p91

The ability of a team to perform was indeed constrained by public disagreement among the members of a team. I saw our disagreements directly negating the team's policy remit and ability to implement and deliver safety nets for poor people. I felt constrained in sharing my views with other policy teams because there was the lingering danger of projecting different messages from those of other members of my team. I feared such mixed messages confused other teams and raised questions about our credibility on the matter. Such questioning of our credibility would have been a source of shame and embarrassment.

The public disagreement was yet another reality borne of local interaction that managers did not choose to happen nor could have prevented, because they did not know that it was coming. It is simply part of the gestures and responses in the living present of local situations that was patterning reality, which in turn determined what the outcomes of the strategy was to be. I realised that the reality emerging from local interaction and micro-practices was not consistent with the wishes of senior managers.

I received an email from a senior manager proposing that a core-script be drawn up that would provide a line to take whenever the department engaged those outside. I sat down with two colleagues to agree the text. However, the constant interference from the team leader resulted in us failing to agree on the drafts. In fact the disagreements actually deepened. Goffman observes that:

to protect this impression of reality, members of the team may be required to postpone taking public stands until the position of the team has been settled. Goffman, E. (1959) p91

This is what happened. Members of our team were asked not to make statements until the position of the team had been settled through the availability of the core-script, but the disagreement over the content of the script was deepening. Goffman advises that:

just as a team-mate ought to wait for the official word before taking his stand, so the official word ought to be made available to him so that he can play his part on the team and feel a part of it. Goffman, E. (1959) p93

It was clear to me that lack of this core-script was weakening our team and overall capacity to deliver on the policy. I could not and none of us could resolve this matter on their own.

As the battle of the minds on this policy escalated, I noted that slowly, what started to emerge were silent manoeuvres based on positions in the organisation, networks and access to senior managers to determine whose views prevailed at the end. One day I got introduced to Joshua, a new member of staff who had just been recruited into the team who had many years of working on safety nets to lead on that stream of work. I could tell from the comments he passed at one meeting that the team leader, who quickly saw Joshua as part of the dissenting voices, saw him as a threat with independent views. The leader literally became selective in engaging parts of the organisation on this policy. He only invited comments from those that shared his views and made sure some key people with different views were conveniently left out of the conversations on major proposals. For example, a key document seeking approval from a Programme Development Committee (PDC) was kept away from critics until a positive decision had been received from the approving authority. Prior to its submission to the PDC, I challenged the team leader to explain his decision not to consult with other key parts of the department. He was frank that he chose to do it this way in order to minimise opposing views and

thereby increase chances of it being approved. The team leader's behaviour was coming through as a "game" in which, according to Goffman, he was playing right "on the margin of the rules". Cobb and Rifkin similarly observes that:

Messages which are most coherent and earliest promulgated tend to prevail, while those that are less coherent or developed secondarily are most likely to become marginalised or colonised by other. Cobb, S. and Rifkin, J. (1991) p35

My team leader wanted a narrative that was coherent and early enough to find favour with senior management. He calculated that once approved, the document carried more weight and would be well beyond any demand for changes. The document would be protected by the rules. Here again, the rules were motivating the team leader's behaviour and his performance.

It was getting clear in my view that the strategy implementation was now unfolding in a way not consistent with the departmental best practice. The rules for working set by senior management were being manipulated by some staff members. At this stage Joshua, who had been recruited to lead on this stream of work, had also raised disquiet about the team leader's decision not to consult widely, saying that he felt quite strongly that he was not being listened to and his own name would be in jeopardy if the project schemes failed. "I cannot put up with this sort of behaviour and any more games, I am out of this place" he confided in me during a lunch chat. I did not know whether or not he was serious about his threat.

Not surprisingly, a month later he offered to resign. However, in order not to cause problems, he simply said that he wanted to pursue private interests. This behaviour resonates with Goffman's view of a team "performance" being incapacitated or embarrassed by public disagreement. A newly arrived and key member of the team, Joshua, chose to leave than risk the shame of being identified as the reason why the strategy was not effectively implemented. Joshua chose to use his power to walk away.

Streatfield draws our attention to this behaviour by saying:

While mainstream perspectives focus attention on formal hierarchical power as the basis of conscious, legitimate decisions, the complex responsive perspective understands power as simultaneously enabling and conflicting constraints that emerge in all human relating. Formal, legitimate hierarchical structures are simply one form of enabling constraints, others emerge in informal communicative interactions, often patterned by unconscious and shadow themes. Streatfield, P. J. (2001) p132

Building on my own reflections on these developments within the team and the organisation as a whole, I feel that Streatfield's view captures the essence of what I was experiencing. Instead of the team leader enjoying power to dominate Joshua, it was Joshua who exercised his power to walk away. The strategy was unfolding not as directed or under managerial control, but on the basis of local interplay of gestures and responses in which Joshua and the team leader were acting in ways that enabled and constrained each other. The local interactions were slowly shaping the reality of strategy implementation. Whereas the senior managers had set out a 3 year strategy, implementation timetable, and targets for delivering the outcomes, the actual speed and mode of implementation depended on the interplay among individuals and groups of people in the organisation, none of whom alone was capable of controlling the entire process.

### **Restructuring and what gets restructured**

Recalling the process of restructuring the central research department, I could see that managers went through a great deal of rational thinking before getting it underway. I noticed though that this was happening against the background of growing informal conversations in the corridors in which some of the managers often characterised the proposed changes as a charade in which they had to play their part. Staff felt that their views were not being taken on board as managers acted as if they were the only ones who had power and wisdom to decide what was needed and how to deliver it. In official meetings staff sat quietly as if they were happy. Managers equally acted as if they knew it all. Goffman recognises this

behaviour in his reflections on our behaviour in everyday life when he quotes Robert Ezra Park.

It is probably no more historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves. Park, R. E. (1950) p249

I spoke to the deputy head of the department who had also just joined the department. “I am absolutely disgusted by the way we are going about this change process”, she protested on the phone to me. “Why did they recruit me to this post if they wanted us to re-apply for the same jobs we hold”, she went on. “Nothing is more frustrating than being asked to do these non-value adding activities besides our real jobs”, screamed another in an e-mail. I felt that part of the cynicism around the change was aggravated by processes that were seen as largely a sham, but nevertheless deemed necessary to meet the public view.

What frustrated us in particular, was the fact that all staff in the research department were asked to re-apply for a job in the department even if that meant applying for the same job that one held already. The process caused anguish and despondency among staff, but it was seen by senior managers as necessary to demonstrate fairness. Goffman regards this as “performance” in the “front” in which the actors and the audience either both participate or in which the performers are cynical.

The cycle of disbelief-to-belief can be followed in the other direction, starting with conviction or insecure aspiration and ending in cynicism. Professions which the public holds in religious awe often allow their recruits to follow it in this direction not because of a slow realisation that they are deluding their audience – for by ordinary social standards the claims they make may be quite valid – but because they can use this cynicism as a means of insulating their inner selves from contact with the audience. Goffman, E. (1959) p31

I could not help but feel the cynicism about our process. Stacey makes reference to complex responsive processes perspective in which patterns of movement form over time, based on social interactions between people who are in the organisation or in the community of practice. Our organisational change was emerging through the behaviour and dynamics of interactions among the people involved in the organisation and not a blueprint of change process.

### **How power relations shape reality**

I observed tendencies for individual staff members to seek favours by name-dropping and quoting those who are senior in the office in most conversations. I saw this behaviour playing out in the process of developing our research strategy. Earlier in the debate about the White Paper, Ministers had made public pronouncements about certain thematic areas, which included focus on economic development, climate change, sustainable agriculture, good governance, and basic services. It appears that managers in the research department quickly picked up the same thematic areas from the strategy consultations and started influencing the office conversations in that direction. In meetings, views were especially welcomed if they supported these Ministerial thematic areas and the drafting of thematic papers was assigned to people who had known views about the issues. The process of the consultations was far less than smart, structured and rational and appeared to follow the tone set by ministerial speeches. Of course, even those ministerial speeches were drafted and constructed around diverse agendas set by individuals with interests and loyalties in the Department. Stacey views these human interactions as:

complex responsive processes of human relating that take the form of conversations, patterns of power relations and ideologically based choices.

Stacey, R. D. (2007) p4

Looking at the process of consultation for the research strategy, I would say that it was a combination of intentions of managers and themes emerging in informal office conversations, shaped by ministerial interests and professional lobbying groups such as NGOs. The vision and mission was not “developed” by “leaders” or

“managers” based on their powers to see into the future. It was a clear manifestation of complex responsive process of human relating shaped by a whole host of personal and collective interests and experiences.

Armed with a research strategy, management had to deal with a restructuring process. The Head of Research sent a memo to all staff explaining how the department was going to implement change. Initially, the managers portrayed themselves as objective leaders given a task of reshaping the department and assigning people new roles and responsibilities.

However, as the change process got underway, what I observed was that the managers themselves were deeply involved in multiple relationships in which they related to different people as individuals and groups within the organisation. Staff became very anxious about the change process and informal meetings and gossip soon became normal pattern of human relating. Streatfield (2001) emphasises the importance of emergent behaviours when he says that:

organisational continuity and transformation, identity and difference emerge in the self-organising communicative interactions of gestures-responses. Such self-organising local interaction in the living present has intrinsic capacity to form and transform patterns. Streatfield, P. J. (2001) p131

One day the Head of the Research got into a conversation with one of the Directors in the elevator and she heard him talk about the possibilities of having regional research offices in Africa, Asia and South America. This idea of regional offices had not come through the strategy consultations but this particular conversation resulted in her deciding that we should create regional hubs as part of the change process. As staff we understood her position to be a response to her own interest because she needed the same Director’s recommendation for a position elsewhere in the organisation. It was in part, her own private interests plus her relationships with staff in general that shaped the reality of the change process. Elias (1991) helps me to understand this behaviour pattern. He says:



only by a change in the structure of interpersonal relationships, a different structure of individualities, could a better harmony be established between social pressures and demands on one hand and individual needs, the desire of people for justification, meaning, fulfilment, and on the other. Elias, N. (1991) p61

The original and rationally constructed organisational structure was now being adjusted as the change unfolded to take account of the emerging interests and preferences of senior people who wielded power. A series of complex responsive processes among players including managers and staff were gradually shaping the reality.

A further development confirmed the emergent nature of change. An email from the Director announced that while the original proposed organisational structure showed that the new department would be headed by a person at deputy director level, the new structure is now headed by a director who also carries the Chief Scientific Adviser title and is significantly more senior position than the original proposal. A post of a deputy chief scientific adviser had now been added to the structure. Both these two positions were not in the original proposed structure. Another change that emerged during these complex responsive processes was the idea of recruiting well experienced senior university lecturers as senior research fellows to be embedded in the various research teams, working on a part-time basis. The new structure now re-branded “Research and Evidence Division” has also been elevated to a division under the new head. When the new head was elevated to director level, there was already a director in place for policy and research. I observed that in order to accommodate the two directors, policy and research were separated and both now headed by the two directors.

Ironically, as the separation was being made at the Director level, members of staff in policy and research teams within the divisions were being moved around to share sitting spaces in the building. Overall, a new position of director-general was created to oversee the two divisions of Policy and Research. These decisions emerged from the micro-activities as part of human relating, patterning reality in terms of power relations, inclusion and exclusion in the organisation. Mumby and

Stohl (1991) suggest that organisations are “domains of legitimate authority” and in which “regimes of truth” are constructed and reconstructed. Management defended these unplanned changes as necessary to create capacity to deliver on the policy and strategy. As staff, these changes that were not in the agreed plan raised many questions.

From my position in the organisation, I am not privy to the details of how some of the decisions were being made to adjust the various structures, but some of the decisions took staff members by surprise, to the extent that they had not been consulted or informed in advance. There may have been many good reasons for the changes – but I found it hard to understand how such changes that implied increased costs could be taken on board at a time when resources were getting scarce. Staff including myself, appeared to question the lack of information and consultation on the process. It appears there was a great deal of both intentional and emergent decisions involved as responses to pressures from within and without the organisation. Senior managers defended these changes by saying they were exercising their right to manage. The changes tasted like warm water in the mouth of staff. Aatio-Marjosola, (1994, p58) describes this managerial behaviour as “managerial hegemony that masquerade as consensus”.

The Strategy implementation was creating emotional waves among staff. For instance, staff did not all welcome the requirement to move spaces. I and my team in Agriculture research were moved to sit with the Food Policy team under the banner of Food Group. For me, it entailed moving from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. The proposed moves raised a great deal of anxieties among staff. For one reason, there were not going to be enough desks for all staff and the senior research fellows joining. I was assigned a new desk together with a fellow adviser. However, after just two weeks of using our desks, I was told by another senior manager who was not even my line manager that I had to move to a desk that is totally removed from my team. I flatly refused because they had not even had the courtesy of consulting me, let alone the idea of taking me away from my team. I joined in a flurry of angry and emotionally charged e-mails, after which it was agreed that I stay on my desk. Westwood and Linstead suggest that:

From a micro-perspective, local interaction act simultaneously as political tools and the ground on which the struggle for power is waged, the object of strategies of domination, and the means by which the struggle is actually engaged and achieved. Westwood, R. and Linstead, S. (2001) p10

My line manager stood solidly behind me in this struggle because he too felt that the process of making decisions involving people needed better sensitivity than had been experienced by staff. It was also eventually agreed that only staff who work at least four days a week would be assigned permanent desks and the rest including the part-time research fellows would be hot-desking. To my mind, the significance of these anxieties both at individual and team levels underline the fragile nature of the so called managerial control and messiness of strategy implementation.

### **Informal networks**

Furthermore, most staff like me felt that moving desks dismembered our networks at the work place. I had gotten used to the morning rituals of chatting about football or other local events during tea or coffee meetings by the kitchen. I shared a widely held feeling that the staff moves were going to result in us losing our identity as members of the research department. The business decisions were upsetting our social and informal networks, including milk sharing clubs in the kitchen and sugar-purchasing rota. It was a shared disconcerting feeling that lives at work had been disturbed. I brought up this issue of possible loss of identity at the staff meeting. The new director was very sympathetic and suggested that we have one day a week when we all re-group for tea or coffee. It was finally agreed that on every Wednesday at 11.00 in the morning, all former CRD staff could meet in the director's office – which is fairly large for tea or coffee where they can chat informally for 30 minutes or so. It was a gesture that all staff appreciated and it is a ritual that has been held weekly without fail. The ritual seems to be binding us together and bringing back that sense of common identity and those nostalgic moments of the past. It is always a busy hive of gossip. The director does not attend.

## **Conclusion**

Within the realm of complex responsive processes, managers are challenged not to make assumptions about people when planning, organising, leading or coordinating strategies. Managers are better understood as subjective participants in local interactions and micro-activities within the organisation. By participating in local interactions, they gain the capillary power that enables them to co-shape the reality in their organisations.

I have recounted my experience of strategy development and implementation in my department and tracked my gradual shift in ways of thinking about strategy. I have highlighted that the dominant discourse on management treats an organisation as if it is a system in which individuals and groups of individuals sit outside and design the organisation's subsystems. Furthermore, I have pointed out how it assumes that managers as leaders have the power to choose what the future would and should look like and as such have unconstrained control over processes of taking the organisation to that pre-determined future. Equally, the dominant discourse emphasises the focus of management attention to planning and controlling the whole organisational systems so that the vision, mission and set objectives are achieved with little or no interference from within and outside the organisation. In other words, the dominant discourse advocates blueprint approach to strategy development and implementation and depends on formal, legitimate, and hierarchical structures as the basis for power and authority to plan and control the organisation. However an alternative discourse, based on complexity theories, enabled me to reflect on my experiences in my organisation, leading me to conclude that change is better understood as emerging pattern from local interactions and micro-activities of human relating. Understanding management through this alternative discourse can enable managers to increase their participation in local and micro interactions within organisations. Furthermore, it enhances one's ways of making better sense of what is going on as well as influencing the process of patterning of human relating in the living present. That is ultimately what shapes reality of strategy. Managers rely not only on legitimate power or hierarchical structures to influence, but on participating in subjective interaction in groups. I am arguing that by participating in micro and local

interaction as part of human-relating, managers could have a hydraulic impact on organisational processes. I use the word hydraulic deliberately to capture the self amplifying power of participating in local interactions. This is confirmed by Fraser (1981) when he builds on Foucault's concept of power. He acknowledges the hydraulic effect when he says that:

modern power operates in micro-practices ..... (and) continually augments and increases its own force in the course of its exercise. It does this not by negating opposing forces but rather by utilizing them, by linking them up as transfer points within its own circuitry. Fraser, N. (1981) p278

Furthermore, I now embrace the alternative discourse that regards organisational changes as complex responsive processes in which the movement of human relationships, self organisation and emergence all perpetually construct the future as people gesture and respond in local interactions. Those complex responsive processes shape the reality of the organisation at the same time that the organisation will be shaping the behaviour of people participating in the organisation.

My narrative of experience in my department has highlighted some of the major limitations in using the dominant management discourse as a way of making sense of strategy development and implementation. I have used my narrative to show how some local and micro interactions in which managers participate, can be seen as the basis for shaping organisation-wide or macro patterns that emerge in organisations.

Similarly, I have argued that the element of intense human interaction in strategy implementation brings in elements of unpredictability, non-linearity and pockets of unknowable characteristics. Human behaviour during local interaction simply cannot be known in advance. Therefore, the complex responsive processes involving local interactions and micro-practices in human relating significantly reduce the manager's ability to decide what the future should look like or to control the process of shaping that desired future.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Project 3**

#### **Understanding Change as Continuous Emergence of Reality**

I have come to understand change as an integral part of every individual, organisation and society at large. People and other living organisms grow old and change features and behaviours as they do so. Individuals change as they interact with others and by so doing, they cause society to change, while society too is at the same time changing them. (Mead, 1934; Elias, 1991). Many writers offer useful perspectives on change. For example, Maltz (1997) asserts that change is necessary and inevitable and that it is far more complex than crossing the street. Marcus Aurelius, (Roman Emperor AD121-180) a well known stoic philosopher once said, ‘the universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it’. It appears to me that life, sense-making and change are seen as inseparable and are part of the universe that is in continuous state of motion. That too is my experience indeed, that every minute and hour or day lived is only lived once and is never lived and experienced the same way again. Former United States of America President, John F. Kennedy once told the world in one of his speeches that change is the law of life. My experience has made me to believe that it is not always for a person to choose the nature and timing of changes in their life, but that the changes occur in spite of them or how they feel about the change.

In my working life, I have observed that the concept of change has gained usage in contemporary discourse in management and strategy development. It has become a way of understanding the world of people and organisations over given timelines. From a systems point of view, individuals and organisations are seen as sharing some common characteristics of being seen as living entities with life that changes over time from conception through infancy to old age and death. Some changes are seen as gradual, linear and predictable while others are dramatic, chaotic and unpredictable. I see the similarities helping us to make better sense of

organisational change. This view is given further credence by Sundarasaradula and Hasan (2006) who posit that:

Organisations exhibit a similar, though not identical, life-cycle pattern of changes to living organisms. They grow, mature, decline, and eventually pass away. However, there are some differences that require attention. Firstly, the duration of each stage is less precise than that of typical organisms. In human beings, physiological growth reaches its climax at about the age of 25 whereas the growth phase of an organisation can vary to a great extent. Secondly, the mechanics upon which changes are based are different. Living organisms are typical biological machines with their own physics and chemistry, while organisations are not. Sundarasaradula, D. and Hasan, H. (2006) p130

Of course, the similarities are only seen and should be seen up to a point. There are many differences between living organisms and organisations. It is not my intention to discuss the full differences here but suffice to say that organisations are social complex entities with far less deterministic and predictable characteristics. Organisations do not have a natural expiry life time and tend to experience changes that are non-linear. Organisations exhibit far more complex behavioural characteristics than living organisms.

In organisations, some of the changes can be seen as both, planned and unplanned, avoidable and unavoidable, intended and unintended. The meaning of the word change in people's daily lives may appear to be simple and straight forward. That simplicity, in my view, is paradoxically the reason it has been problematic. The paradox is that everyone thinks understanding change is simple and that the meaning is obvious to everyone, but when asked to explain its meaning and how they experience it, they talk about different meanings. So is the same with various change projects initiated by organisations, they are experienced differently and come across with different meanings and expectations for different people. Therefore change has often been seen in ways that have left people disillusioned, disappointed and cynical.

Stacey (2007 p270) proffers the view that “an organisation is conversation and organisation and strategy emerge through conversations”. From this point of view, I believe change can be better understood as changing conversations. Similarly, Maltz (1997) tells us that organisations are continually immersed in transition and since change is an inevitable part of organisational life, resistance is correspondingly inherent and should be reframed, explored and worked, not eradicated or fixed. It is therefore critically important to unpack the concept of organisational change.

In this narrative, I am providing a detailed account of my experiences of organisational change in which I have been involved as a donor group representative pushing for change in development partners’ organisation. I am not hired to work with the organisation involved. I am interacting with the organisation during the course of advancing what I consider to be our mutually important business. I am situating my narrative and thinking in various approaches that help me to understand the issues.

As I do so, my question is: how do local and global interactions shape the reality of change projects and processes? How does understanding change as a continuous emergence of reality help us manage it better? What are the limitations of viewing change as a blueprint?

### **What changes: the frame or just the pictures inside?**

I accepted a request to join a team comprising a number of colleagues from the World Bank and other bilateral donor agencies to meet with senior managers of Southern African Development Community (SADC) in order to explore ways of setting up effective aid delivery channels for agriculture research. Because of my background and role in my organisation, I was given the role of being leader of the donor team in this business relationship.

I had just had the benefit of working with a block of countries in East Africa and another one in West Africa on similar initiatives and both had gone very well. My team had used a number of approaches that worked in those regions and we hoped



that we could take lessons from those. Our first meeting with SADC officials was to agree on the agenda and ways of working towards our common objective of providing quality agriculture research for poverty reduction and economic growth in Southern Africa region of 15 countries.

#### Delays and protocols as ways of stifling change prospects

The first meeting was to be held at the SADC offices and there were seven of us who had flown from America and Europe to meet with these officials. The meeting was scheduled to start at 9 am and our team was at the offices 15 minutes early. We waited outside until the receptionist invited us inside at 9 am. We sat in the lounge until 9.30 am without anyone explaining to us why the meeting was not taking place. I went to check with the receptionist who then promised to find out and come back to me.

It was soon 11.00 am and an official then came to us and apologised that the Executive Director (ED) had been delayed and would only start the meeting at 12 noon. In the meantime we got cups of tea and coffee but we had to wait for 3 hours to have our first meeting. However, because we were sitting within earshot of SADC clerical staff, we found it hard to use that time for internal team discussions of what was going on.

Finally the ED walked past us towards his office, warmly greeted by his SADC staff. He did not say a word to us. Soon we were guided into the Board room and were sat on one side while his officials took seats on the opposite side of the massive desk. Moments later, an adjacent door opened and the ED emerged and his team stood up in his honour. We also stood up, not being sure how to respond. The ED took his seat at the top of the table on a massive gold coloured chair with a high back, just a meter below a neat row of portraits of current heads of state of the 15 member SADC body. He asked us to take our seats. The reason I am giving this elaborate account of our first meeting is that it sets the scene of what was to confront us for the rest of our interaction with various SADC staff: behavioural and attitudinal constraints.

What change, whose change?

After all the formalities had been done, I introduced the purpose of our visit and our expectations from the emerging relationship. I mentioned that as a group of donors, our collective interest was to find the most effective way of channelling our resources for agriculture research within the SADC sub-region. I stressed that we were completely open on how this may be done, for as long as the mechanism provided value for money. I set out the issues that we thought needed to be addressed in our search for an effective research partnership. These included the need for broad local ownership, managerial autonomy for researchers to make quality decisions, clear and accountable corporate governance arrangements, open and transparent grant making systems, strong and credible operational procedures, robust team of motivated and qualified research staff, and a shared strategic plan. On our part as a donor group, we were prepared to invest up to £30m over a 5 year period.

“It is my view and also SADC policy that development programmes are decided and managed with full local ownership”, responded the ED. On his part the ED then demanded that we use his Directorate for Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources (FANR) as the unit to receive and coordinate the aid resources for research. He went on to outline to us its size, staff numbers and mandate. Most significantly, he pointed out the importance of following SADC protocols in all dealings with the unit. Upon our further enquiry, we were advised that all business and meetings would be conducted in accordance with SADC protocols and rules.

However, given what we already knew about the SADC secretariat and what the ED had just told us, it was so obvious that our minimum standards for investment would not be met, and prospects for change appeared limited.

The meeting adjourned at our request till the following day to enable us to re-group as a donor team and coalesce our positions into one strong message to the ED. As a team we agreed that we were seeking to persuade SADC to establish a new Sub-Regional Organisation (SRO) with its own constitutional framework and representation from all relevant stakeholders. We were to provide resources to help

SADC establish this new research body. We spent the rest of the week discussing the way forwards and the necessary steps to get this new research body up and running. We also organised ourselves and sought to pair up with SADC officials to enable us to focus on the detailed change implementation processes. SADC officials remained adamant that we use FANR Directorate to fund agriculture research, and made it clear that they felt that this was yet another example of donor impositions.

### **Making sense of the initial engagement**

As I sat down trying to make sense of this initial engagement with SADC officials and my colleagues from the donor community, I was struck by the behavioural differences between the two teams. To my mind, my team was committed, punctual, sincere, and most importantly motivated to help SADC. However, I saw the SADC officials as not caring, not bothered and less interested in fully engaging us. I noted that the behaviours of the SADC officials were also different from what I had observed in the East Africa SRO (ASARECA made up of 10 countries) and West Africa SRO (WECARD comprising 21 countries). I had this premonition that although we had successfully managed to establish robust research organisations in those two sub-regions, our experience in Southern Africa was likely to be a very different and difficult one. I have heard arguments that successful experiences of change can be collated and used as models of best practice in new change projects. My experience in using models within SADC was proving to be different and this view is confirmed by Stace (1996) who warns that:

Strategies for organizational change which are successful in one business era, and in one culture, may not necessarily be successful in another. Yet the evidence is that powerful espoused ideologies about how best to effect change often live on within organizations, well beyond their capacity to help sustain positive performance. The espoused ideal approach to change becomes a myth which clouds the ability of managers to analyze their environment incisively and to move against the prevailing logic of change in the organization. (Stace, D. A. (1996) p2

The so-called best practice tends to constrain our ability to ask questions about what we are doing and often leads us to conclude that those who are asking questions are resisting change. In as much as we were engaging people of Southern Africa on the same issues as we had engaged those of East and West Africa, it was not perhaps surprising that we were getting different responses to our gestures. The context was different. Our interlocutors were asking questions that we conveniently considered not consistent with best practice. However, on reflection I now consider my involvement within the unique historical context of the interface between the donor countries and the people of Southern Africa and how that played into power relations and perceptions of reality. “Why is it that you donors always want to impose your conditions on our countries? We should be left alone to make our choices”, nonchalantly remarked a senior SADC officer to me during dinner. It was possible that the officials were not comfortable with the attitude and behaviour of the donors, (mostly former colonial masters) whom they may have seen as a reincarnation of imperialism. In any case, my team may have naively acted as if the SADC region were the same as those in East or West Africa. People do not remain the same over time and across regions. As Elias (1991) points out:

Society... is all of us; it is a lot of people together. But a lot of people together in India or China form a different kind of society than in America or Britain; the society formed by many individual people in the twelfth century was different from that in the sixteenth or twentieth century. Elias, N. (1991) p69

Reflecting on Stace and Elias’ words, I begin to question my own team’s approach to working with SADC officials. My team had taken our experience in both East and West Africa to be models on how to approach Southern Africa region. There was now evidence of SADC officials pushing back on some of our ideas for creating a new sub-regional research body. The behaviour of the ED, that is coming late for the first meeting and not even bothering to apologise to us came as complete shock to my team.

James C. Scott (1990) gives me great scope for analysing and understanding the behaviours of my team and the SADC officials. He portrays social interactions as characterised by public and hidden transcripts. On one hand, the public transcript is

the action and attitude that is openly avowed to the other party in the power relationship and the transcript includes verbal and non-verbal, written and non-written expressions. On the other, a hidden transcript is given as the “offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript. Scott argues that both dominant and subordinate groups of people employ public and hidden transcripts in their human relating. In Scott’s view, hidden transcripts include private conversations, gossip, and practices linked to religion and culture, and discourses around common social status and hierarchical positions. It was becoming quite clear that both my team and the SADC officials each employed public and private transcripts that shaped our local interaction.

Could it be that the ED was personally arrogant or that he represented how SADC as an institution could be viewed? Mead (1934) tells us that a person is a personality because he belongs to a community, from which he takes over the institutions of that community into his own conduct. Could it be that we were also naïve not to have sought advice on the type of people we were going to meet and do business with or perhaps the ED was simply making a protesting statement to the donors? Elias (1991) points out that people interact with intentions, although the intentions will differ. Stacey (2010) seems to share this view when asserts that groups perform a function for each other, even if such functional relationship is not desired. I found myself and my team increasingly relying more and more on our hidden transcript of SADC for some meaning of what it is that we were doing together with them – that hidden transcript portrayed SADC officials as uncommitted people driven by self-interests and who did not care about the poor people in their countries.

The more I reflected on our encounter with the SADC officials, the more I got bewildered. I reflected on my team’s and our organisations’ unwavering commitment to poverty reduction and how that had motivated us to travel at great cost thousands of kilometres to Africa to find ways of helping poor people. I contrasted this commitment with the lukewarm response we got from the SADC officials and it just did not make sense at first.

During meetings, my team and SADC officials continued to speak to each other in cosy diplomatic language of respect and formal niceties that reflected our official positions. It was important to keep it that way in accordance with the rules of engagement. However, it was also evident in our informal interactions that there were significant levels of anxiety and exasperation in the way we were coming across to each other. The late arrival of the ED and delayed start of our first meeting and subsequent instances of the SADC senior officers simply not being available for scheduled meetings were instructive.

My team's hidden transcript painted SADC as a difficult working place. The culture of entitlement and sense of power were notable characteristics well known in civil services of countries with poor accountability mechanisms. For example, I could not help but observe that there was a chronic moral hazard on travel and subsistence allowances within the SADC secretariat. It had taken my team months to secure the appointments with the secretariat and arrange this visit because each member of SADC staff was almost always out of the country on business or away at a workshop or seminar. I learnt that for each trip to Europe, America and Asia, a SADC staff member received US\$500 per day for bed and meals while in Africa, a staff member would receive US\$400 per day. With both hotel and meals averaging US\$250 per night, each official could save up to US\$250 per night of a visit. It was not unheard of for each official to be away for two weeks in a row.

As a result, staff members were "earning" more from travel and subsistence money per month than from their regular salaries. To make this worse, both the regular salaries and the subsistence allowances are tax free. As a result, SADC staffs are so difficult to find in the office and travelling now appears to be the real business. In addition, such conduct negated our view that aid money should benefit the poor and the vulnerable members of society. The high travel and subsistence expenses were seen as taking away money from the poorest. It is this behaviour at SADC and its close links with social and political culture of member countries that caused us to demand change.

I realised too that much of the information we had picked up about SADC, on our hidden transcript, was sensitive and as such, we had not been as open with SADC

officials about the real reasons we did not like investing in SADC FANR. We had diplomatically merely impressed upon them to establish a new SRO. Within my team, we acknowledged the real reason was because we were not happy with the politics and endless protocols of SADC secretariat which we considered capable of paralysing any research business we may agree with them. The FANR Directorate that SADC had offered as a potential research partner to donors was grossly understaffed and most of its employees like all SADC secretariat staff, are drawn from member country governments. As such they could only be fired if the sponsor government agrees. All appointments to positions in the secretariat are made through member countries on a quota system. We had even heard stories of certain senior staff having been drawn from the intelligence services to join the SADC staff. Our assessment was that, overall, the work ethic at the SADC secretariat was poor and negated everything we stood for. Furthermore, the culture of chasing perverse incentives such as endless travel allowances and engaging in private ventures just made our investment too risky. After days of arguments and counter arguments, the SADC officials eventually appeared to accept our request for creating an SRO, but the ED reminded us that development of the Southern countries was, is and will remain a responsibility of the people of those countries.

### **The public and private selves**

How do I make sense of my team and the SADC secretariat's attitude towards each other? It also occurred to me that my team did not know or fully understand the individuals in the SADC secretariat nor did they know us beyond the official introductions. I realised how we were characterising the SADC officials as "them" and my team as "us". What we were experiencing together fits well with the concept of Johari Window (Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham , 1955).

### **The Johari Window**



In this concept, they portray social interaction within any group of people in terms of public and private selves. Luft and Harry saw people in a group in terms of four windows 1) what is known by the person about him/herself and is also known by others; often described as open area, open self, free area, free self; 2) what is unknown by the person about him/herself but which others know - blind area, blind self, or 'blindspot'; 3) what the person knows about him/herself that others do not know - hidden area, hidden self, avoided area, avoided self, 4) what is unknown by the person about him/herself and is also unknown by others - unknown area or unknown self.

I would argue that on the basis of the Johari Window concept, our teams shared a much larger unknown area and thus creating less trust and confidence in each other. Given also what we did not know about them and what they did not know about us, there was also a large hidden area to our relationship that we needed to reduce. Similarly, the information each one of our teams had about the other team (but not known by that team) meant that each of our teams had some blindspot that constrained our relationship. This impacted on our interactions. We needed to engage each other in ways that created more space and expanding the open area.



I also realised that I was probably caught up in this micro-interaction which reflected a much greater and global schism and other conversations of “us” and “them”, “we” and “you”, based on identities and other labels. It also dawned on my mind that the SADC officials may have been articulating the legitimate voices of a huge geo-political group of nations that are regarded in International Development discourse as less developed countries of the South.

### **Language as a differentiation tool**

I recalled how language is used as a differentiation tool in power relations during human relating, both in micro and macro level interactions. At the global level, the poor countries of the South were once labelled ‘third world countries’ in international development discourse until the term was challenged by a large group of these countries. It is interesting to note that while the poor countries were labelled ‘third world’, those in the North called themselves ‘first world’ which in some sense implied that there was even a ‘second world’ gap into which the ‘third world’ countries would graduate before making it into the ‘first world’.

Stacey (2010) reinforces this point when he observes that:

power relations are both stabilised and changed by particular ways of talking that have to do with the membership that is part of the pattern forming processes of communication. Stacey, R. D. (2010) p185

This is how I was experiencing relations between my team and the SADC officials.

For quite some time, that language was acceptable and fully functionalised into all learning and development institutions. I submit that such type of language is part of the tools of social control that is often used to shape structures and behaviours of individuals, organisations and institutions in ways that suit those who create the labels. I also experience that language in my daily interactions in the office. The South (hemisphere) is characterised as ignorant, unable to help themselves, less

capable and needing help from the North. Robin Wooffitt (2005) brings up a similar view that:

The vocabularies we have for describing the world bring into play a range of expectations and constraints.... Dominant discourses thus privilege ways of seeing and acting in the world which legitimate the power of specific groups.  
Wooffitt, R. (2005) p148

I look back at human history and see evidence of how the world has been differentiated in terms of East and West during the ideological cold war, the North and South in terms of development, black and white in terms of race, the elites, the middle class and the poor in terms of class. These labels and language have served to configure power relations and generated conflictual interactions between the respective groups of people. I argue that the various forms of labels and language reflect the individual and social values, ideology, meanings and sense-making of the time. As these elements change, so do the labels and language. Stacey also further takes up the use of language and its role in enabling and constraining behaviour and attitude during social interaction when he observes that:

Categorizing people into this kind or that kind, with this or that kind of view, may be experienced as threatening ..... because it creates potential misrepresentation of identity and potential exclusion from communication.  
Stacey, R. D. (2010) p184

Given that a number of 'third world' countries were former colonies and with the end of imperialism many of these countries, especially the smaller ones, were faced with the challenges of nation and institution-building on their own for the first time. Due to this common background many of these nations were for most of the 20th century, and are still today, 'developing' in economic terms. This term when used today generally denotes countries that have not 'developed' to the same levels as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, and which are thus in the process of 'developing'. In the 1980s, economist Peter

Bauer<sup>3</sup> offered a competing definition for the term ‘third world’. He argued that the attachment of third world status to a particular country was not based on any stable economic or political criteria, and was a mostly arbitrary process. The large diversity of countries that were considered to be part of the third world, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, ranged widely from economically primitive to economically advanced and from politically non-aligned to Soviet - or Western-leaning. The only characteristic that Bauer found common in all third world countries was that their governments ‘demand and receive Western aid’ (the giving of which he strongly opposed). Thus, the aggregate term ‘third world’ was challenged as misleading even during the Cold War period. However, the effect of these terms was to divide peoples of the world in ways that reflected power relations.

The issue of third world label and power relations reminded me of Stacey’s (2010) theory that it is acts of power relating in the ordinary politics of everyday life that ideology arises about our judgement of what is good and what is right about acts of power; and that at the same time, these ideological judgements also shape our acts of power relating. In this light, Stacey sees ideology taking the form of communication that preserves the current order by making that current order seem natural. This resonates with my own experiences of studying political and economic history. For a whole generation, the world was seen through the lens of third world and first world countries; in which the latter assumed a moral and historical duty to help the former. My team’s visit to SADC offices might have been seen by our SADC interlocutors through that lens as well.

Today, I now understand that the language has shifted from ‘third world’ to ‘developing’ countries while the ‘first world’ is now labelled the ‘developed’ countries. The term ‘developed’ countries carries the connotation of being

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Thomas Bauer, Baron Bauer (1915 - 2 May 2002) was a developmental economist. Bauer is best remembered for his opposition to the widely-held notion that the most effective manner to help developing countries advance is through state-controlled foreign aid.

‘complete and finished to perfection’ and therefore no longer in need of improvement. Yet the reality of it is that all countries are still looking for that magic formula for meeting people’s growing needs within the technological, economic, social and political constraints.

My initial sense is that my team may have used the Western frame of reference to judge the organisational culture at SADC secretariat and the influence from the behaviour of the member states. The role of identities in human relating is fundamental to understanding power and how it plays out in shaping reality. Wooffitt (2005) discusses the issue of power from Foucault’s perspective when he writes that power is located in relationships and further argues that:

discourses shape and constitute our identities, and legitimate certain kinds of relationships between those identities, thus locking people into particular kinds of social arrangements. Wooffitt, R. (2005) p151

That is how I experience social relations in organisations where job titles, departments, office arrangements, vehicle and parking spaces all define power relations during interactions. For example it is common practice to hear certain members of staff constantly dropping in every statement they make, the name of the Chief Executive Officer in order to gain recognition and display proximity to the centre of official authority that legitimises order of things.

I and my team members saw ourselves as ‘we’ from the North and developed countries on a mission to help ‘them’ in the South and the developing countries. ‘We’ were the ones who had the ‘solutions’ and ‘they’ had the ‘problems’. ‘We’ were in favour of big changes and ‘they’ resisted change. Elias (1991) argues that when seeking to understand change, the environment to focus on is the environment which people form for each other.

This perspective of viewing individuals and society, arguably, seems relevant to understanding the power dynamics that characterised my team’s interaction with SADC officials. During this interaction with SADC, I felt that I was enmeshed in this intense and conflictual relationship with officials on a number of issues. The

first one, I thought, being a native of Southern Africa, I sense that sometimes there may be instances when those representing African institutions are not sure about how to make sense of my role as an emissary of the West or North. And yet, I also feel that my African interlocutors often feel much more comfortable with me when, for instance, they confide in me some of their deep resentments of Northern domination. I am also not sure how to make sense of such gestures. Could it be that they may be making gestures of inviting me to join them in their resistance to Northern domination or perhaps, they identify with me on being an African. Whatever meaning one may choose to attach to the conversation of gestures and responses that was shaping the reality of my team's interaction with SADC, there is no doubt that global conversations were also at play. Our individual, organisational and social identities were interacting with global conversations in ways that shaped our local interactions during the change process.

But how much scope for change did this local interaction offer to my team and what prospects were there for putting new rules and organisational structures within SADC? My team discussed the state of affairs at the SADC secretariat and got so convinced that working through FANR Directorate under these conditions would be unacceptable. We had no choice but to insist on the creation of a new, effective and accountable research body. I recognised that this was important to protect the reputation of my organisation. If we had to invest resources, we had a duty to demand that there be a safe environment for that investment. Elias (1991) discusses how people jostle to satisfy their needs, desires, short term and long term; tensions arise, pushing for structural changes. But why would SADC officials want to change from the status quo that seemed to give them travel benefits and power?

### **Burning platform for change**

According to **exec.actioncoach.com** there has to be a “burning platform” for people to accept a major change, more so one that involves difficult choices. They tell us that the concept of a burning platform originated in a story about a worker on an oil platform in the North Sea, who was awakened in the middle of the night by a sudden explosion. As he emerged from his protected, but endangered shelter, he realised he had a difficult decision to make. As the fire raged behind him, and the

thick black smoke threatened to choke him, he walked to the edge of the platform and assessed his chances of either staying on the deck or jumping into the water.

Which ever way, the odds weren't good for him because from the platform to the water, it was a 150-foot drop. There was flaming debris and burning oil all over the surface of the water. Even if he survived the initial jump, the water, barely above freezing, would kill him within a period of 15-minutes. Doing nothing was not an option either.

The man opted to jump off the platform and survived the jump, and fortunately for him a rescue boat came quickly and hauled him aboard to safety within moments of his fall.

Within my team, there was consensus that a major change was required to move from the proposed SADC FANR Directorate to an autonomous and accountable research body. We had many good reasons for asking for this change. The reasons essentially revolved around the importance of the poverty agenda and the mismatch of that importance with the poor SADC work ethic and inadequate accountability at the secretariat. My team's initial judgement was that this was sufficiently a burning platform to warrant change. But could this also be seen as a burning platform by SADC staff? Hardly so, I thought later. The problem was on how we were to communicate these issues in a frank, firm, fair and formal way to SADC. Given the nature of politics at the secretariat, I judged that it would be impossible to even think of reforming the FANR Directorate and perhaps more difficult to agree on this form of reality. From my perspective, reforming the directorate would have been an act of re-arranging pictures in a warped frame. What we needed, I thought, was to see a new frame in which to put new and attractive pictures. Demanding and communicating the issue of change with SADC marked a poignant stage in our emerging relationship and required tact and ruthless frankness, both of which were proving to be a little bit elusive.

## **Reflecting on our responses**

I reflected on the complex issues that confronted me and my team. I considered the issue of power and human relating. Foucault, M. (1977) tells us that power resides in each and every one of us and that our micro-practices determine how we share and negotiate it as part of the process of human relating. As such, neither my team nor SADC officials would have had the unfettered power to force change on the other. Stacey (2010) argues that people engage in social processes that constitute games in which they interact and that involves sharing and negotiating power figurations. We had just begun the engagement with SADC but how were we to play the game. Even if we had offered aid money to act as an incentive for influencing the change, there was no guarantee that SADC officials would respond to our gestures accordingly and effect the desired behavioural changes.

I considered some rational approaches to pushing for change. Thompson, A. A. and Strickland, A. J. (1999) view strategic change processes in terms of visioning, setting objectives, crafting the strategic plan, implementing the plan; evaluating and feeding back in to the process. Kotter (1995) developed a model with eight steps of understanding and managing change. His model entails eight steps: 1) increasing urgency; 2) building the guiding team; 3) getting the vision right; 4) communicating for buy-in; 5) empower action; 6) create short term wins; 7) don't let up; and 8) make change stick. This approach, however, assumes that somehow there is one person or a manager or group of managers with control over the thinking process and behaviours of all other people involved or affected by the change. However, as illustrated in my second project for this research, there is no one person with omnipotent powers to decide what the future should and would look like or to direct how each person shall behave during a process of human relating. Complex responsive processes in which individuals do participate in local interactions, explain what goes on in organisations through various conversations. Both the future and the behaviours of individuals in their living present emerge from these local interactions and micro-practices, which in turn shape the macro or population-wide patterns in transformative ways (Stacey, 2007). That is to say that individuals and groups in local interaction shape the global reality at the same time that global reality will be shaping the individuals. We simply could not have engaged in some

visioning and strategic planning process about the changes in SADC. I do not think that my team had such control on SADC officials, but I fully recognise the shared power available to both of us in our relationship to interact in ways that could shape the future that we desired.

The views of McMillan and Carlisle (2003) may help in casting the different approaches that my team and the SADC officials experienced during our discussions. They characterize organizational change approaches in three different ways: defensive/conservative, opportunistic and goal oriented. Defensive approaches start from the assumption that something inherently valuable must be defended or preserved in the current order. Under this approach, the future may be seen as threatening an existing valued state of affairs. In organisations, such conservative ideologies lead to the kind of strategic thinking which is predisposed to adopt 'defender' strategies designed to preserve the existing identity of an organisation as a valued set of human relationships.

Opportunistic approaches, meanwhile, perceive the future to be open ended, offering the opportunity to shape the course of events in so far as they can be beneficially accommodated within the ongoing practices of an established organisation. Nothing, however, is regarded as sacrosanct. Language such as 'starting afresh', 'starting on a blank sheet', 'complete replacement' has been used to represent this approach.

Goal directed approaches, on the other hand, view the future as offering an escape from a crisis situation by transforming the present state of organisational affairs into an alternative and more desirable state of organisational arrangements by the realisation of a premeditated programme of organisation reality reconstruction. This approach is compatible with planned, rational comprehensive programmes of change. It may be seen as reflecting the strategic approaches to multinational re-organisation which dominated corporate boardrooms in the 1970s.

In hindsight, it would appear that an opportunistic approach fashioned in a complex responsive process paradigm might have given us some more realistic and cooperative change prospects. Such a perspective could have opened future



possibilities and opportunities as we progressed our relationship. Furthermore, that process could have taken place in ways that enhanced local ownership as we related to each other in co-creating the future. Stacey (2010) argues that the future emerges from our past and present experiences, and the meaning we attach to those experiences shape our local interactions and how we collectively shape the future, with or without specific intentions.

### **Converging pressures on the change process**

I also reflected on the enormous pressures converging on the change process. My team comprised seven people belonging to 5 different and independent organisations who on the basis of mutual interests, had agreed informally to work together and coordinate their field programmes. As such, my team was not that perfect homogeneous unit that acted in unison. I noted a number of significant disagreements and levels of expectations during our own interactions. During my team meetings, we tried to identify and manage the areas of disagreement such that we would confront the SADC officials with one coherent message. Goffman (1959) points out that:

Public disagreement among members of a team not only incapacitates them for united action, but it also embarrasses the reality aimed by the team.  
Goffman, E. (1959) p91

What made it sometimes difficult to maintain a solid team performance were the levels of expectations each one of us brought from their institutional bureaucracies at home. The bureaucratic rules of each of our organisations in many ways constrained and enabled individual members of the team to respond to the changing needs on the ground. Each one of the team members had come with their specific terms of reference (ToRs) for the consultation mission and we had to reconcile many areas of disharmony. I would think that this is what March et al (2000) highlight when they say that rules define identities and boundaries and stabilise linkages with other organisations.

However, the rules made it a bit harder to make progress without making a number of compromises. The positive aspect of my team though was that we had all worked together on some previous assignments and therefore had developed some form of familiarity which created confidence and trust among ourselves and thereby enabling us to navigate around difficult issues. We had managed to increase the size of our public area (Johari Window).

Additional pressures came from the tight deadlines each one of the team members worked to. Due to the fact that different aid donors have different budgeting and accounting cycles, each member had pressure to align the change process with their own demands. Furthermore, the change processes had to fit with our different performance management frameworks for the year. I did not get any sense that members of my team had any less commitment than I had. On the contrary, every member allowed team tasks to prevail even if it meant that they were playing at the margin of their organisation's rules. As such, the team was fully functional as a united act.

As I reflect on my experience, it appeared that SADC were in favour of a defensive approach which preserved the status quo by channelling donor resources through the FANR Directorate. My team, on the other hand, were in favour of a goal directed approach that sought to establish a new institution with its own management team and programme of work, outside the main SADC secretariat. It was perhaps this rational approach that failed to recognise the myriad of relationships and factors that were at play in the change process. My team acted in ways that suggested that we were engaged in a fairly linear, causal, controllable, and objective process; and believed that it therefore was less likely to threaten the officials while creating a new institutional framework for effective aid delivery for agricultural research. That is perhaps where my team missed the opportunity to anticipate, prepare for, and participate in the emerging reality. I would submit that the emerging reality that we were co-creating in our local interaction constituted the change that was feasible.

## **Re-framing the change paradigm**

During my team's first visit to the SADC Headquarters in Gaborone, Botswana, we appeared to have been on the verge of gaining a major concession from the officials in terms of them agreeing the idea of setting up a new SRO with which we were to do research business. Not wanting to lose the momentum that had been created in our first visit, we had quickly re-scheduled another visit within three months to discuss the scope of the proposed SRO. In the meantime, SADC secretariat was to consult with member states whilst we were to do the same and seeking funding approval.

During our second visit, we found the ED fully engaged in other SADC business issues including political conflicts in the region. We expected to see at least the Director of FANR who was leading the change discussions. On the day of arrival, I made contact with the SADC office, and I was extremely disappointed to be told that the FANR Director had left for Rome, Italy, the day before our arrival; even though she had given us a written assurance that she would be around for the week of our visit. Instead, my team was to meet a projects officer who also happened to be a citizen of Botswana. The significance of this officer is in the fact that as a citizen of the SADC hosting country, his job is permanent and he enjoys expatriate package. On arrival at the SADC offices, the officer drove us to an agriculture training college in the outskirts of the capital where he introduced us to a team of three consultants based there. Apparently, we were to work with these consultants while the officer went to attend to his private matters, which as we were to learn later, included his construction ventures in the capital. We were to learn that the three consultants were actually part of earlier technical assistance funded from another donor project.

There we were, seven of us representing 5 development agencies with potential to invest £30m over 5 years in agriculture research to enable 15 countries with chronic poverty and food deficits to attain food security, economic growth and reduce poverty. And yet, none of the SADC officials could make themselves present to discuss the mechanism for funding. My team had been given all assurances that the Director and his officer would be with us for the whole consultation week.

## **Values and ideology in development**

Nevertheless, we went ahead to meet with the consultants and agreed on an agenda for the whole week. We were told the Director would be back in the country over the weekend of our scheduled departure. I requested that we delay our departure so that she could meet with us and go through the matters discussed with the consultants. She was due to travel to yet another country in Africa 3 days after arrival. The Director agreed that upon her return, she will have a two hour meeting with us on the Sunday just before our departure.

The way I make sense of our interaction with SADC officials during the second visit is that the meaning of change is as simple as it is problematic. It tends to be understood by reference to who you are, what one's interests and where one sits in a given ideological paradigm. Most importantly the ideologies act in paradoxical ways, in that, they both enable and constrain change processes. To us, the behaviour of the SADC officials was so unacceptable that it buttressed the urgent call for change from our own organisations. It appeared to me that the SADC officials did not care at all about what was going on. Ironically, this lack of care seemed to strengthen their share of power in our relationship. From this experience, I would suggest that in a relationship, power shifts towards the party that cares less about the relationship. We found ourselves bending backwards e.g. delaying our departures, seeking meetings on Sundays, working with the consultants instead of the principals, and on the whole appearing to be desperate to invest research funds in the region. Why did we not just walk away? We had the power to do so or did we? There was evidently no motivation for taking things forwards within SADC. Ordinarily, I would have considered walking away.

My team did not simply walk away from SADC. I thought there was tension and conflict of values and ideology at the centre of our behaviour. My team seemed to be collectively seized with an attachment to a higher sense of purpose in which we believed that it was better to stand up for millions of poor people who are in need of aid, than succumb to what our Western ethos clearly saw as the selfish behaviours of the SADC officials. Riding on the ideals, values and aspirations of our respective donor organisations, all my team members did not consider walking away as a

solution to the basic problem of poverty and food insecurity in Africa. McMillan and Carlisle (2003) argue that ideologies give a qualitative patterning to reasoning and decision making in which values come into play. Their view is that:

An ideology is architectonic in that it is a logically structured understanding within which ideas about human values, procedures and objectives are ordered. Such an understanding is formative of an interpretative perspective on experience. In the contexts of different organisational cultures, different ideas and values may take priority in evaluations of experience and strategic considerations. McMillan, E. and Carlisle, Y. (2003) p.4

Furthermore, they describe an ideological argument, as 'logic' that systematically deploys a set of related ideas in a fashion which is prescribed by the form of its logic. In this light they contend that our ideologies convey the force of their conclusion in the form of a categorical imperative to act, and thereby shaping our attitudes and behaviours. It could, therefore, be argued that meaning and purpose of what people do can be shaped by and may better be understood by reference to the ideological driving force. That force gave meaning and purpose to what my team was doing.

This argument portrays the way I and my team were experiencing our interaction with SADC officials and captures the basis on which we resolved to remain engaged with them. Our ideological stand on international development shaped the nature of our engagement with SADC officials. This view of ideology and values as a driving force is also vindicated in Stacey's (2010) words that:

Values are highly motivating aspects of themes that arise in a particularly intense collective and individual experiences, involving imagination and idealisation, and serve as the basis for evaluating and justifying desires and actions, as well as the norms constraining them. Stacey, R. D. (2010) p193

On the basis of the ideology and values we held, I remained buoyant about the prospects for successful change outcomes within SADC. For one thing, my team members and our respective organisations shared passionately a strong belief in the

use of aid to reduce poverty and the need to build individual, organisational and institutional capacity for effective delivery of that aid. Over the last few years, aid, poverty reduction and economic growth have become prominent, idealised and generalised as what Mead, (1934) called 'social object'. These are seen as gestures together with tendencies to respond in particular ways and have been generalised or/and particularised, as the case may be, by all those in the development community in their actions (Stacey, 2010). It is probably true to say that more than ever before, aid and poverty reduction as social objects now enjoy the highest political recognition and financial commitments ever in human history. Stacey in particular, argues that:

The generalisations construct perceptions of unity in the patterning of our interactions across a population. That imaginatively perceived unity is then a generalised tendency to act in similar ways. Stacey, R. D. (2010) p166

As I reflect on my team's united responses to the SADC officials' behaviour, I realise how deeply aid and poverty reduction have been codified and functionalised through institutions. They have been idealised in national and international political debates and engagements and given full expression through international, regional, national and local institutions. In that respect, each of the governments of the group of 8 rich developed countries have pledged to reach a contribution of 0.7% of their GDP towards international aid by year 2015. The leaders of Africa have equally responded by committing themselves to allocating 10% of their national budgets towards agriculture and to ensure that economic contribution of agriculture reaches 6% of GDP by 2015. With these shared values and our view of the social object, my team felt very strongly that we were pushing for the right changes and answering a higher call for international development. My team stood firm.

My view is that these global commitments represent an ultimate expression of that global social object and collective values encapsulated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). My team's shared view of this social object enabled us to remain focused on the need for change and the sort of new SRO we needed in order to deliver agricultural research aid effectively. As Mead (1934) acknowledges, when social objects become fully functionalised, they become a

form of social control – configuring power in ways that enable and constrain people. My team felt empowered to maintain our position against the discouraging behaviour of the SADC officials.

#### Value of “metis” and dangers of impositions during change

However, I am also reminded of the critical views of Scott (1998) on the subject of centrally imposed order of doing things. Scott argues against the idea of hegemonic state impositions on how people should live their lives. He cites as his evidence, among others, the disasters that followed the Bolsheviks’ imposed “collectivisation” in Russia during Lenin’s rule; the *Ujamaa* “villagisation” in Tanzania in the 1960s during Julius Nyerere’s rule, the relocation of 33 million people in Ethiopia in 1985 and the Germans’ botched scientific and “geometrically” driven re-forestation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Scott is reminding us that when scientific knowledge or foreign experiences are imposed upon complex environments like societies or agricultural practices, they are almost always at risk of being inefficient, inappropriate and at times dangerous. Scott argues that every society or community has “metis” (Greek word for knowledge that cannot be reduced to formulaic instructions) that is essential for finding solutions to local issues. My reflection is that Scott provides vital health warning and sound caution against any approach that fails to build on local knowledge, experiences and ownership.

Looking at our behaviour in relation to SADC, I, however, remain motivated by a fundamental theory of transformative causality expounded by Stacey, (2007, 2010) that says that agents at the local level form population-wide patterns while at the same time being formed by them. It could only be our interaction with SADC officials that had the potential to bring about the change we envisaged. My team had the benefit of aid and the way it is understood as a global and generalised imperative for poverty reduction, from which we drew our confidence and conviction to particularise the meaning and intentions within SADC region. Stacey (2010) lends weight to this view when he contends that:

The global is the imaginatively created unity we perceive in patterns of interactions across the populations we are members of; it is the generalisation

and idealisation as one phase of the social object. The local is the particularising of the general and functionalising of the idealisation in local interaction. Stacey, R. D. (2010) p166

What this means for me and my team is that we shared the global view of aid and this conferred power on us in relation to SADC officials . We could use this power to influence change process during our engagement with the SADC officials. I thought my team stood on the verge of gaining a major concession from SADC and we had just about one hour to do that with the FANR Director. My team drew solace from the fact that we had reached agreement with the SADC consultants and the projects officer on the need for a new SRO. Furthermore we had shared some ideas of what that SRO would look like and the scope of its mandate, governance, and operational environment. The basic principles had been set out and a road map had been worked out. My team went to meet with the FANR Director at her office on the Sunday of our departure.

Given that it was a weekend, there were no other people in the offices, except a handful of some who had one errand or another. “I have only one hour for you this morning”, the Director firmly told us. The Director apparently had already been briefed by the consultants. It turned out she did not want a presentation from us. She simply wanted to use the meeting to ask a number of questions; to clarify and confirm what the consultants had briefed her on. At the end of the meeting, she thanked us and concluded that she was going to brief her own boss, the ED, who in turn will brief the member countries before writing to us on the final decision. No timeline was given for this SADC consultation process.

“You are not to make any assumptions one way or the other on the way forwards until you hear a final answer from SADC”, the Director instructed us in a parting shot. That was not a very positive message but I was motivated that at least, the Director had not rejected our ideas outright. In an effort to secure our position and have a record of the matters discussed and the common understanding between my team and SADC officials, I asked my colleague from the World Bank to prepare an ‘Aide Memoire’ to be signed by all parties, perhaps a few days after our mission. Our respective offices were to sign that as proof of the agreed position, I hoped.



For the second time my team was leaving the SADC offices in Botswana without a firm agreement on the table on what was to change and the form of that change. We had some idea of what had been discussed and broad principles agreed, but clearly cautioned by SADC not make any assumptions about the future. That was a difficult message to take back to my own principals, and I imagine, for my team members too. Our principals had firm expectations from the two missions to the SADC offices. Any further receding of key decisions by SADC and increase in our travel budget would be real bad news for my team and for each one of us as individuals. Days and weeks were ticking away on my annual performance plan and yet four months into the year, I still had no tangible results. If things did not change soon, I was sure, I would be on course to miss my bonus. That was a frightening thought.

### **Self-interest and behaviour towards change**

Abstracting from my involvement and experience during the latest visit to SADC offices, and trying to make sense of my team and the SADC officials' attitude and behaviour in our local interaction, I concluded that we were both probably being influenced by our self-interests as much as we were by ideology and values. My hunch was that, on one hand, the SADC officials saw the proposed changes as possibly threatening their additional income from travel allowances while, on the other, I and possibly all members of my team were motivated by the fear of losing performance bonus if the year ended without achieving our goals. Other donor aid programmes gave money direct to SADC and they managed the funds, out of which they funded the endless trips that earned them travel allowances. I saw both sides performing their acts based on hidden transcripts of fears and expectations that we did not feel comfortable to disclose openly to each other. I saw both of us display private and public acts motivated by official and informal agendas. Jensen (1994) quotes Professor Brennan (1994) as saying that economic man will never perform without incentives. This may be true to some extent. However, Jensen views this reasoning as inadequate as a generalisation of the attitudes and behaviours of human beings, arguing that this is a view limited to a rational man; of which not everyone is. Instead, Jensen argues that human behaviour is essentially complex

and exhibits both rational and non-rational tendencies. He believes that people cannot be changed the way we change inanimate things and similarly, human relating cannot be changed based on some plan as such. He believes that by changing the institutional structures, contracts and informal arrangements to reduce conflicts and govern our relations, we create better opportunities for local interactions that improve human relating. This view resonates well with own experiences. Clichés such as ‘what gets rewarded, gets done’ have emerged from observations of how people change in response to their changing environments and incentives.

### Conventional thinking about change processes

Casting the attitudes and behaviours of the SADC officials through the lens of conventional change management theories, I would probably have characterised them as being resistant to change. Traditional change management theories put managers as leaders and drivers of the change process and they deal strongly with any resistance by agents that are seen as blocking progress. Olson and Eoyang (2001) tell us that:

Traditional notions of change management are leader-driven. They are based on the principle of continuous measurement and controlling people, processes, and systems within the organisation. (*They emphasise<sup>4</sup>*) strong control from the top by constructing processes for achieving strategic objectives. Olson, E. E. and Eoyang, G. H. (2001) p4

They contend that the traditional change paradigm holds deep, largely subliminal assumptions and values about efficiency, control, standards and deadlines under the guise of best ‘best practice’. When the change process is held back or when the assumptions fail to hold, the response is often more change projects. The notion of control and measurement is highly questionable in the sense that reality is not shaped by individuals acting outside the change environment. It is shaped by both local and global interactions of individuals and groups during what Stacey (2007;

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<sup>4</sup> My phrase in italics

2010) calls complex responsive processes. When the measurement and control fail, the temptation is to initiate more changes. Olson and Eoyang (2001) cite the work of Anderson (1999) who describes the effect of such endless changes as follows:

Change initiatives follow change initiatives, eventually leading to cynicism about change management in general. Reorganisations eliminate one set of issues only for another to occur. Anderson, P. (1999) p114

Similarly, traditional change management processes conveniently identify people with labels and as already argued above, such labels are used to control people's behaviour and attitudes through naming and shaming for those not seen to be in favour and recognition and salary increase for those in favour of change.

It was probably easier or convenient for my team to characterise SADC officials' response to the proposed changes as typical resistance to change and our own behaviour as enthusiastic. However, such a view does not fully recognise the complexities involved in local and global interactions during processes of change, that is , human relating in the living present; and certainly is not sufficient to explain our attitudes and behaviours during change projects.

I saw my team's role as that of defining, influencing and possibly driving the changes in the SADC institutions to create different institutional settings for human relating that could possibly shape the quality of research programmes that we wanted in the region. The way I make sense of my experience is that my team's involvement and detachment in the process was both constraining and enabling the change processes. For example, as outsiders, my team may have been seen as coming with their own ideas for change, trying to influence the top leaders to accept our ideas, and pushing the leaders to then drive and effectively control the change process towards pre-defined outcomes of our choice. My team may not have felt obliged or compelled to understand the reality of what we called the bad practices within SADC. In the end we were probably seen as lacking the legitimacy to push for those changes.

## **Change breeding more change**

“The Council of Ministers has approved the proposal to create a sub-regional agriculture research body for Southern Africa to be called the *Coordinating Centre for Agriculture Research and Development for Southern Africa (CCARDESA)*. The attached document outlines SADC’s proposed legal framework, management arrangements, and operational parameters”. My team finally received a letter from the SADC ED containing the above message. The message invoked mixed reactions in me. On one hand, I was excited that the idea of creating a separate research body had been approved and that represented a major breakthrough from my team’s point of view. However, on the other, a quick look at the proposed legal framework, management arrangements and the operational parameters clearly showed that there were many more obstacles ahead before getting the desired outcomes. The SADC proposals made the new entity much less autonomous with great scope for managerial interference by the SADC secretariat. The proposed Board was to be staffed entirely by permanent secretaries of the fifteen member countries. My team had to start preparing for another round of interactions with SADC over these arrangements in order to refine these proposals and create more space for the new research body. This was absolutely vital for getting funding approvals at our Headquarters.

My team started preparing for another phase of the change process, but this time focusing on the proposed legal framework, management arrangements and operational parameters.

## **Conclusion**

The way I experienced my role in leading a team of donors that engaged SADC officials on change processes helped me to shed light on some complexities of change and the way we understand it. Indeed, my experience provided major learning points and potential for further exploration. Right from the beginning of the engagement, I saw my team participating in a process of change that was far from being neat and rational. In fact, I saw my team being involved in social interaction with SADC officials in ways that reflected our power relations, itself a

major insight in the processes of change. Our social interaction was characterised by complex responsive processes that were messy, often uncontrollable and unpredictable; and without a pre-defined pathway. My team and SADC officials were co-creating a new form of reality from our local interactions with each other, not necessarily reflecting what each one of us wanted. Our intentions, gestures, attitudes, behaviours and identities were all eliciting and generating responses from one another during processes in which change was emerging from what we were doing together.

The first insight I got was that there is no simple understanding of change and each individual or group of people attach a different meaning to it, depending on a number of factors. Change occurs in spite of people and how they feel about it. Change is what people experience as they live their lives together. It emerges from local and global interactions and can best be influenced by participating in those interactions. As such, any talk of change in organisations is experienced differently and generates a different meaning and expectations in different people. For instance, although we started our engagement and interactions with SADC officials based on shared intentions, the unfolding process was characterised by many factors that constrained and enabled our individual and group attitudes and behaviours and actions. Much as my team had come with specific ToRs and set of ideas, these factors were constraining our ability to follow them through. Equally, SADC officials had come into the interaction with their own intentions and views, some of which they too had to adjust in response to the gestures they understood to be coming from us.

The key factors that constrained and enabled our attitudes, behaviours and actions during interactions with SADC officials included our identities, ideologies, values, self-interests, historical relationships, official and private rules of engagement and the emerging power relations. These factors interacted in complex ways that created novelty and spontaneity, which ultimately shaped the reality of our actions together. The change process could not be set out in advance as a blue print. The power relations did not give my team or the SADC officials that unfettered opportunity to decide what was going to happen. We had to engage in a series of the conversations of gestures and responses to establish common ground.

These values, ideologies, interests, identities, norms and ways of making sense are not biologically embedded in individuals at birth. They emerge from our experiences during the process of social interactions as we grow up as individuals and part of society. These experiences constitute the process of socialisation and become part of who we are and how individuals and groups of individuals make sense of their world. My team and the SADC officials brought different experiences and meanings of what were doing together. Some of those experiences and meanings generated conflicts and different ways of making sense to our local interactions. Similarly our social interaction at the local level presented both of us with opportunities to shape a new form of reality for the future that we wanted. The future was not set in a blue print and there were no written plans and procedures of how that was going to be created. It was emerging from what we were doing together.

The social interaction between my team and SADC officials included how each of us used public and hidden transcripts to make sense of what was going on. Each of us appeared to be empowered by the fact that we did not know each other in detail and only relied on official identities and rules of engagement. People interact in complex responsive processes by way of gestures and responses that cannot be reduced into a plan of action, nor can they be predicted with any degree of certainty. Instead, the local interactions in the living present shape the global or macro patterns which also simultaneously shape those local interactions. For example, my team's deep involvement and belief in the ideology of aid for development shaped our attitudes, behaviours and actions, while the historical and colonial and north-south relationships may have been influencing the SADC officials.

These social interactions occur between individuals; within and between groups of individuals, communities, societies, organisations, and globally. They do not always occur in intended, pre-defined, predictable, or controllable ways but tend to emerge from both local and global interactions. Change within the SADC organisation was emerging within a paradigm of complex responsive processes

within social interactions of my team and SADC officials; in a way that offered a realistic chance of shared ownership, meaning and outcomes.

This is an area I wish to investigate further in my next project.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Project 4**

#### **Social interaction as political behaviour during management of change**

I am recounting the story of some critical changes in my government department and the way I am experiencing the behaviours of managers and staff during the change. I am doing so with a view to demonstrating my ability to explore my work and how I am thinking about it. I am drawing from prominent writers and my own experiences to develop a coherent theoretical base, informed by a critical awareness of broader issues arising from my practice.

I am exploring emergence of political behaviour in organisations, taking up the writings of, among other, Machiavelli (1992); Buchanan and Badham (2008); Butcher and Clarke (2001); Oade (2009); Runciman (2008); Brandon and Seldman (2004). On social interaction and human behaviour, I am taking up the writings of Berger and Luckman (1966); Burkitt (2008); Mead (1934), Scott (1990); Elias (1991, 2000); while Stacey (2007, 2010); MacMillan (2008), Itzkowitz (1996) provide complexity perspectives to understanding organisations.

The focus is on the theme of managing change and exploring certain behaviours that manifest themselves in managers and staff during that process of change and strategy implementation. My key questions are:

- What is the nature of and in what ways do the behaviours of managers and staff shift during organisational changes?
- What are the implications of such behaviours for current management theories and practice; and
- What new ways of thinking about behaviours of managers and staff can improve our understanding of management practice?



I will use the story of my experience in the department to respond to these questions and reflect on my own practice and available literature to suggest additional theories and perspectives about management practice.

### **Formal rules of work**

My narrative is located in my department in which there is both a legislative (Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010)<sup>5</sup> and administrative (Civil Service Code of Conduct<sup>6</sup>, and the Civil Service Management Code) set of rules about how staff should conduct themselves when undertaking their duties. The code of conduct guides the behaviour and ways of managing relationships of civil servants. That Civil Service Code is issued by the Minister for the Civil Service and is part of the contractual relationship between a civil servant and their employer. The Code sets out the high standards of behaviour expected of a civil servant. Further details on management of the civil service are enshrined in the Civil Service Management Code. The management code supplements the generic management theory. All civil servants must display these prescribed behaviours in their everyday work. Crucially, if a civil servant is asked to do something that conflicts with the values set out in the Code, or is aware that another civil servant is acting in conflict with the values, he or she should raise a concern within their own department. Departments must consider concerns raised by civil servants under the Code, and must ensure that those civil servants are not penalised for raising such concerns.

In summary, the main requirements are that civil servants must be honest and impartial, meaning they must be, and be seen to be, honest and impartial at all times in the way that they carry out their work. They must refrain from political activities and must not take part in any political activities which compromise, or may be seen to compromise the impartial service to the department. They are required to attend work regularly and fulfil the terms of their employment contract, maintain the expected standards of conduct, behaviour, performance and attendance in line with departmental values, policies, instructions and procedures. They should carry out

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/25/contents>

<sup>6</sup> [http://dfidinsight/LearningSight/PUB\\_006520](http://dfidinsight/LearningSight/PUB_006520)

all reasonable instructions given by managers or by Government Ministers, comply with departmental diversity policies and practices, demonstrate commitment to our diversity policies in dealings with colleagues and external parties and to show respect for others and treat them fairly.

In this regard, civil servants must not take part in any political or public activity which compromises, or might be seen to compromise, their impartial service to the Government of the day or any future Government. Similarly, civil servants must not seek to frustrate the policies, decisions or actions of Government either by declining to take, or abstaining from, action which flows from ministerial decisions or by unauthorised, improper or premature disclosure outside the Government of any information to which they have had access as civil servants. This is the rational framework set out for civil servants. The question is, how are the legislative and administrative frameworks functionalised in day to day conduct, attitudes, behaviours and actions of civil servants in my department, particularly during times of turbulent change.

### **Domino effect of change**

As I came into the office on that warm Monday morning in May, I had mixed feelings about the unfolding political developments in government. It was the week after a general election in the UK. I felt hopeful and worried about what a political change would mean for my department, my team and my job. Just as I arrived at work, I met John, a teammate, in the elevator and he looked quite agitated and greeted me with a question: “So, what is the latest news in this political drama”? I just smiled back and shrugged my shoulders. As I walked towards my desk, I could feel a pervasive air of uncertainty and anxiety across the open sitting area on our floor. The usual exchange of staff greetings were dominated by rhetoric questions about the events of the previous week. The results of the general elections in the United Kingdom had just been announced over the weekend and it was now known that there was no political party that had won a clear majority in Parliament to form a government. That result was of particular significance to my department in many ways. I heard managers in my department, rather guardedly and anxiously, speculating about possible political configurations that could emerge from the

behind-the-scene negotiations that were taking place within the three major political parties about forming a new government.

In the weeks before the elections, my departmental management had reminded all staff about how civil servants were expected to behave in times of elections. The guidance made it clear how civil servants were supposed to behave and conduct themselves before, during and after the elections. The guidance was all couched in the core values of impartiality, honesty, integrity and objectivity in our work, something that appeared to me to be taken for granted. For example, the terms of honesty, integrity, objectivity and impartiality may have been assumed to have universal meanings and yet these can actually be contested. In particular, one can question what is meant by honesty, integrity, impartiality and objectivity and to whom, for whom and how. There are neither single nor simple answers to these questions. Interestingly too, I found the guidance rekindling memories of my school days when the revered school head would always remind us about strict rules that applied when another school was visiting us. “How some things never seem to change”, I bemusedly mumbled to myself. As staff, we were required to be objective, professional and neutral in our relations with political parties. On that Monday morning, an email from the head of the department had already flashed on our computer screens reiterating that position.

### **The echo effects**

However, the emerging political scenario of no single party winning the elections with an outright majority had not been witnessed in recent history and, as such, nobody in the civil service had direct experience of what that meant and how that would affect our normal work. I could see that, in spite of the guidance, there was widespread anxiety and the emerging scenario was generating animated private discussions among managers and staff on political implications of what was going on. Evidently, but striving not to openly vitiate the spirit of the civil service code of conduct, management and staff were furtively discussing the politics surrounding the hung parliament.

The way I was experiencing this was that, in as much as they were unsettled by the emerging events, senior managers were also trying hard to assure their staff that everything was alright and that they were in control. However, the level of uncertainty was evident in a note that came down from the head of department during the hiatus which announced that until further notice, “we were not to communicate anything as government policy, since there was no government in place”. It was not until after another week that a coalition government was finally announced and things had to change in line with the new government’s political priorities.

### **Shock treatment and emerging behaviours**

A verbal directive came from senior management through the hierarchy for staff at head office “to clear their desks of all previous (Labour) government policy documents because the new (Coalition) ministers may not want to see those documents as they walk around to meet staff”. Senior managers accepted these new messages without questions, in line with the civil service code. The clearing of desks was both a substantive and symbolic act of how as civil servants, we were now required to change, we were told. The immediate question to my mind was: How is it that so much hard work by staff (on Labour policy documents) could suddenly be declared undesirable and irrelevant over night without any formal discussions?

It was hard to make sense of it for me. I sensed panic. It sounded very much like a tectonic shift in ideology, unleashing a ‘tsunami’ of immediate changes in the civil service. As civil servants, we were required to take the minister’s instructions without questions. There seemed to be an assumption in this directive that civil servants are mere vessels in which old mental contents can be emptied and new ones loaded when there is a change of government. I could not understand how the projects and priorities that we seemed to hold so dear to our hearts could simply be wiped out overnight and new ones installed in our minds. Besides, we had spent enormous resources and time developing these documents being dumped overnight. Machiavelli (1992) contends that a new leader can gain more control if he inflicted injuries at once on those against him, while conferring benefits to loyalists little by

little so that the benefits may be more relished. I am also reminded of Klein (2008)'s description of the 1960s American psychiatrist, Dr Ewen Cameron's experiments at McGill University. Dr Cameron is said to have used shock treatments to erase patients' memories and knowledge in order to create a "new slate" for installing new ways of thinking. What exactly was going on in my Department? I struggled to make sense of it. My hunch was that as civil servants, we were caught up in ideological conflicts. The coalition government used the rhetoric of correcting errors of the last government to justify the drastic changes and public spending cuts. This echoes what Klein coined disaster capitalism, in which she describes how people experiencing disaster shocks are treated to forced changes, ostensibly in order to correct problems of the past for their own good. These "shock treatments" include the three trademark demands of privatisation, state deregulation and deep cuts in social spending. In our case, the ministers announced immediate austerity measures which included a 2 year freeze on our salaries and travelling cheap on duty travel. They also told us to trust the private sector more for service delivery. I got the sense that my Department was going through its own shock treatment at the back of recent global financial crisis. The fiscal objectives appeared to be driving the shock treatments. I was left wondering: Are human minds, attitudes and behaviours externally structured and can they be changed overnight and in pre-planned ways?

#### How managers actually managed during difficult change

A major question I wrestled with was: What are the managerial functions of senior civil servants during such major transitions? To my mind, it was as if senior management and staff only existed as mere pawns in a game in which politicians transmit their political ideologies, priorities and way of thinking through robotic and neutral civil servants. It prompted a further question: Where does this behaviour stand in the conventional, rational and institutionalised view that says managers are there to lead, plan, organise, and control organisations? In my case, I was experiencing this idealised world in which the language of impartiality, integrity, honesty and objectivity appeared to pave the way for an imposition of a superficial sense of harmony, unity and neutrality in the behaviour of civil servants. Can people really be neutral? Is it human to be neutral or is being neutral human?

The animated discussions by staff on the unfolding political changes, seems to point at the artificiality of the neutrality label.

The way I make sense of this is that the neutrality label appears consistent with the conventional way of thinking about organisations, in which they are understood as systems with ontological structures designed by neutral managers. Managers are required to design change plans that are couched in corporate language that is seen as neutral and understood to be carrying universal meanings. Stacey (2007) argues that managers are not neutral outside observers, but enquiring participants in the organisation, in which affective human interaction through politics, power, pride, prejudice and other forms of emotional involvement, form the basis for shaping the organisation-wide patterns and ultimate reality. Itzkowitz (1996) equally argues that:

individuals are motivated to participate in conversations (*in organisations*<sup>7</sup>) based on emotions, not necessarily cognitive decisions and rational thinking.

Itzkowitz, G. (1996) p32

He posits that both micro and macro processes of social interaction are not determined by normative or instrumental structures alone, but that emotions, morality, and social construction of reality are critical in understanding social action and human behaviour. The way I make sense of this is that managers and staff members do not act without hidden and personal agendas. They are not detached from what would be going on in the environment in which they are part. They cannot simply be regarded as neutral. In that sense, the language of neutrality, impartiality and objectivity used in the civil service code is a form of idealisation, representing a veneer over the messy reality of management practice.

### **Language as an instrument of social control**

I saw further signs of change and links of our business with domestic politics when the Ministers announced that “in the current financial climate, we have a particular duty to show that we are achieving value for every pound of taxpayers’ money that

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<sup>7</sup> Words in italics are my own additions for clarity

we spend on development. Results, transparency and accountability will be our watchwords and will guide everything we do”. I got the sense that this new language was instrumentally calculated to functionalize the new government’s way of thinking in all staff in my Department.

In my view, this was the clearest demonstration of how the political change was beginning to shape the way we operate. The language used by ministers appeared to suggest that previous ways of doing things, neither provided value-for money, results nor accountability. If it were the case, I wondered, could this have been a criticism of the senior management performance? The senior management themselves did not seem to respond to that suggestion and appeared to be accepting the criticism as a fact. But why would senior management behave this way? Brandon and Seldman (2004) may help shed light on this type of behavior. They posit that “corporate survival-of-the-fittest situations do exist, especially in tough economic competitive and cost-conscious times”. My sense is that this behavior of senior management may be explained more by the desires of individuals to survive some threatening organizational change than mere adherence to the management code. If indeed the senior management was accepting that they had performed badly, then they should have been held to account by being replaced. It seems to me that, either senior management traded complete acquiescence for survival and favour with the new government or they conveniently assumed that the new ministers were in fact criticizing the previous government ministers.

A bulletin from senior management on the department website announced that as a result of the new government priorities “we do need to demonstrate efficiency and value for money in all that we do, and we are directly affected by some of the cross-departmental commitments on recruitment, consultancy and pay”.<sup>8</sup> The commitment in question referred to a major decision by the coalition government to reduce public spending, including a general freeze on external recruitment, public sector pay, consultancies and marketing, and down grading of duty travel facilities for staff members. These were significant changes indeed. Management further advised that “while we expect further guidance on all these over the next couple of

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<sup>8</sup> Weekly newsletters from senior management to all staff

weeks, this note sets out our understanding of the impact of these, and how we plan to handle them”<sup>9</sup>. I could see that it was not going to be business as usual but major and radical changes were in the offing.

The coalition government announced a Structural Reform Plan (SRP) as its framework for doing business. A senior politician in the coalition government came in person to launch the SRP at our offices. He told staff that “the Structural Reform Plan is a very simple and radical idea in which you (the department) set out, in very simple terms, in three, four or five pages, the key objectives and achievements that you collectively are working towards”. I saw senior management quickly taking this up by assuring staff through a website bulletin that “the Leadership Group (top three grades) have been discussing how we will lead the department through these difficult times. We agreed to adopt a flexible approach that takes account of circumstances in our own areas. We are all committed to being honest, fair and transparent in our decision making and communication. We will seek and respond to feedback, recognising that even when we have no choice in taking unpopular decisions, we can often adapt the way we implement decisions and adjust timings to avoid local overload”<sup>10</sup>.

Furthermore, senior management promised that decisions will be devolved to the lowest possible level, giving staff freedom to be innovative in finding solutions. “As far as possible we should trust the people down the line to make the best decisions”, the management newsletters promised. I will come back to this issue of how change was functionalised at the local level.

### Building bridges

Senior management often went beyond the written codes in seeking to facilitate the difficult changes they had in mind. They sounded conciliatory and actively built bridges in their communication with staff members. For example one of the regular newsletters cajoled staff by admitting that “many of these changes are personally unsettling, possibly affecting jobs, ways of working, and cherished programmes.

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<sup>9</sup> ibid  
<sup>10</sup> ibid



We have been hugely impressed with the way that individuals in the department have risen to the challenge, working hard to respond to new demands while maintaining good professional judgement without sacrificing on quality”. That language struck a chord with most staff members. In addition, an end of year newsletter from senior management to staff painted a very colourful future by declaring that: “Looking forward, the future for the Department is truly bright. This is very exciting. We are also on a trajectory to a more evidence-led and results-focused way of operating. Professional skills and judgment are at a higher premium, and we are streamlining our policy priorities for greater impact. There is still a lot to be done, but we are confident that the hard work of 2011 will start to pay dividends in 2012”. Staff members were told that redundancies were not on the table and that all other options will be explored first. I sensed that senior management were clearly glossing over difficult issues of potential job losses and declining incomes in order to minimise staff anxieties. With that level of assurance from senior management, it was not surprising that many staff members and trade union groups gave senior management more space to act.

### **Ambivalence and duplicity**

However, unbeknown to most staff members, senior management secretly negotiated with the Treasury on whittling down the available redundancy packages. It was only a couple of months down the line that staff were told of a new and reduced redundancy package, with an accompanying invitation to certain grades to consider taking it voluntarily. Staff members were livid when they eventually got to know this information from the Department’s website.

Senior management clearly went for the “low-hanging fruit” and “early wins” (Brandon and Seldman, 2004) as a way of winning the hearts and minds of staff. A few months into the new government, Ministers and senior management had begun taking credit for their work by announcing to staff that ours was one of the only two departments not to suffer drastic cuts in budgets over the spending period and as such we were in a unique privileged position in the civil service. Indeed, I had seen management significantly demonstrating goodwill towards the incoming new ministers. My hunch was that management were ingratiating themselves with the

ministers. In fact, the Minister himself confirmed this goodwill at a later event when he was announcing the impending departure of the head of the department. He told staff that he was truly indebted to this head because she had helped the new ministers with information in their last few months as shadow ministers.

The way I was experiencing management behaviour was that they were very conscious of and fully compliant with the rational legislative and administrative rules for the civil service. However, in practice they were politically savvy and willing to play the game even in the margins of these rules in order not only to win the support of the politicians, but also survive the changes and retain staff confidence in the face of adversity. In some sense, they actually managed to portray a degree of control over what was happening. For example, the way the senior management switched loyalty from the out-going government to the incoming one was truly in line with the core value of impartiality in the civil service code and yet, was characterised by remarkable political behaviours aimed at sustaining own survival within new productive relationships.

Nonetheless, what I found really interesting and something I struggled to make sense of in the department was the speed with which senior management quickly abandoned the ideologies, policies, practices, and language of the previous government in favour of the new government. I could not help observing that up to the time of elections, senior management spoke passionately about the policies enshrined in the Labour Government White Paper commitments on a number of issues in international development. However, all that passion for those policies appeared to vanish quickly as the old policy documents were binned. The passion quickly resurfaced in favour the new coalition government policy intentions. To my mind, this echoes Machiavelli (1992)'s words that:

It is customary for such as seek a Prince's favour, to present before him with those things of theirs which they themselves most value or in which they perceive him chiefly to delight . Machiavelli, N. (1992) pvii

Senior management were determined to please the new ministers and were not going to allow anything to stand in the way. For example, they made it very clear

that the change process was not negotiable and that they would not hesitate to deal with anybody who would stand in the way. At the same time, they continued to use colourful language to paint a picture about the future because they also wanted to remain good in the eyes of staff members.

This ambivalence, duplicity and “double speak” (Orwell 1949) is typical of what Machiavelli (1992) discusses at length when writing about new leaders (Princes) presiding over difficult changes. Machiavelli recognises that introducing change is one of the most dangerous undertakings for a new leader. In this respect, he contends that a new leader “should make haste to inflict what injuries he must, at a stroke, that he may not have to renew them daily” (p23). He argues that evil that is well employed is good to help overcome resistance. However, Machiavelli also recognises that a new leader “should be on friendly footing with his people, since, otherwise, he will have no resource in adversity” (p25). In his view, a leader who manages change and “desires to maintain his position, has to learn how to be other than good, and to use or not to use his goodness as necessity requires” (p40). When the worst comes to the worst, Machiavelli argues that in times of change, “if we must choose between them (to be feared or to be loved), it is safer to be feared than loved” (p43). His reason is that being loved depends on others, whereas being feared depends on the leader himself. As such, he concludes that it is better to depend on what is your own, rather than on what rest with others.

### **My reflections**

Machiavelli’s level of duplicity and double-speak in leaders, taken literally, perhaps could be seen as too far for business organisations. Machiavellian approaches tend to assume that it is the leader (Prince) with power to make things happen. In reality though, power is shared in relationships (Foucault 1977). Taken literally and practiced regularly, the level of ambivalence and duplicity in leaders portrayed by Machiavelli will clearly be unhelpful in management practice, especially where alliances are more desirable than fissures. This is because while Machiavellian forced loyalty may be sometimes necessary, it certainly is not sufficient to maintain cohesion and cooperation for accomplishing team tasks. However, it is important to

recognise that managers do inherently engage in this type of behaviour during social interaction in organisations.

To a great extent, I saw some elements of Machiavellian behaviours in the way that senior management were functionalising the new policy directions from politicians. I observed that this level of political behaviour increased with the level of position in the department and this appears consistent with the view of Berger and Luckmann (1966) that “an executive must be ‘politically sound’ in a way not incumbent on the supervisor of the typing pool”. However, a survey carried out in British managers (Buchanan 2008) indicated that political behaviour was not a preserve of senior management, with 83% of respondents agreeing that politics is played at all organisational levels and 84% saying they are prepared to play politics when necessary.

I sensed that some new chemistry was emerging between senior management and the political establishment. For example, it was reported in one internal document that the “Head of the Civil Service and senior politicians are well aware of the media criticisms of public servants. They have, however, made a point of praising us as civil servants for the way we handled the transition to the coalition. HM the Queen has recognised this by meeting all Permanent Secretaries to thank them”. I felt that, in return, senior management were becoming very sensitive to the political pressure that politicians were experiencing in respect of public spending on aid.

In one communication, my Department management reminded staff that “some parts of the media and the public are very much against aid spending in the current economic climate. We cannot ignore this and we must demonstrate value for money, impact and efficiency very quickly to support the political will to stick to the spending commitment”. It was clearly in management’s favour to be seen as defending the new policies. Machiavelli (1992) tells us that “men, thinking to better their condition, are always ready to change masters”. I sensed that something of this sort may have started happening in the department. The pressure from politicians, the personal objectives and interests of management and staff, the court of public opinion as well as the rules set out in legislation and civil service code were all interacting in dynamic ways that both constrained and enabled the behaviour of

management and staff and therefore the practice of change management in my organisation. It is this interaction that consciously and unconsciously, intentionally and unintentionally patterned individual and group behaviours. I observed that the development of policies, strategies and the implementation processes involved intensive bargaining in order to navigate the multiple stakeholder interests. This is how I was experiencing what was going on.

### **Language and meanings**

The language of the coalition government's Structural Reform Plan quickly set in. Senior management took this up in the way they organised the overall internal change process. Management did not start with a vision, a mission statement or a strategic plan. The strategy emerged from the iterative processes at different levels of the Department. My reading was that this approach appeared to be consistent with the senior management pledge to allow decisions to be made at local levels.

Notwithstanding, some managers at head office felt that it was only country based managers that were being given more scope for making decisions that were shaping the business plan, while other managers bemoaned that "there is less trust in frontline managers to use their delegated authority" in the department. I could only sense that the change process did not seem to mean the same thing to all the managers and staff. This is not surprising at all because meanings are socially constructed in individuals and emerge from the social interaction around power relationships. Meanings in social phenomena are neither fixed, nor universal and tend to change as experiences and events are told and re-told during social interaction. Power relations are constantly being negotiated and reconfigured during social interaction. Foucault (1977) and Itzkowitz (1996) both point out that power resides in relationships and that social actors create and define power during social interaction, particularly around interests and identities. Itzkowitz (1996) observes that:

Power as generated in social interaction is reflective of social reality... and is always used, ignored or remains hidden at various levels within the context of social interaction. Itzkowitz, G. (1996) p240

The managers who were complaining may have felt that the change processes were reconfiguring power against them.

In order to discuss the various complaints that were being raised about the resource bidding process, we were called up to a meeting. Tensions were high among some of the team leaders because they felt that their sectors or thematic areas were being sidelined in the process of collating and prioritizing the bids. The Chair, in response to my question, openly and candidly, told us: “Frankly, it is up to each team to play its cards well in order to sell its programmes”. It was only then that most of us got to know that heavy lobbying had been going on behind the scenes to get influential personalities to facilitate access to directors and ministers.

Although team leaders held weekly meetings, they never shared this information possibly because it was seen as a winning advantage by those who had it. Only those teams with inside information managed to gain access to Ministers. This was rather disappointing as there had not been a public invitation to all teams to participate. The question is how can we better understand this behaviour. Runciman (2008) points us in the direction of hypocrisy (from Greek term *hypokrisis*, meaning playing a part in theatre). He argues that hypocrisy is in every one of us and it is hypocrisy not to acknowledge it. Runciman posits that “no one likes it, but every one is at it”, which means that it is difficult to criticise hypocrisy without falling into the trap of exemplifying the very same thing one is criticising. The way I make sense of this is that it is in every one of us to hold back from others, who and what we are during social interaction. It is part of how we negotiate power relations. This resonates with how I understand Machiavelli’s portrayal of duplicity in leaders. It sounds to me that there is a certain level of hypocrisy and duplicity that individuals and society are willing to accept as useful during social interaction. For example, smiling at your boss or work colleague in public when in fact you loathe them in private, is politically more acceptable than sneering at them; or holding back information that gives one an advantage in the organisation. The question is who determines this level and what would this mean for management practice. What sort of hypocritical behaviour in managers and staff do we want to accept?

## **Perspectives from literature**

Reflecting on my experience of what has been going on, the change process has struck me as deeply enmeshed in politics. As I watched the pace of change gaining momentum in the department, the question that kept coming up to my mind was: Just how much political behaviour is in every day management practice and what is the view of current management theory on this phenomenon? What do we understand as organisational politics or political behaviour in organisations? Is there a world of organisational politics and another world of management practice? Are the two one and the same or two ends of a continuum?

### **Political behaviours**

A number of writers seem to agree on the main ingredients of organisational politics. Politics is sometimes viewed at three distinct levels: a) formal national and international institutions of government and activities that take place therein; b) public space in which contestations determine public good and choices; and c) distribution of power, wealth, resources, thoughts and ideas within all institutions and at every level of society (Heywood 2004). Of the three interpretations, the last one is often labelled politics with a small “p” and that is what I consider relevant in the context of organisational politics. It is that type of politics that takes place within families, groups of people, organisations, communities, and indeed throughout all units of society. Mulgan (1974) takes up Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC) ’s work, in which Aristotle tells us that man is a political animal. In one sense this statement is understood to mean that man is formed and functions in a social context. His behaviour is inherently a social phenomenon.

According to Heywood,

politics can be understood as a social activity which arises out of interaction between and among people and involves the exercise of power and authority.  
Heywood, A. (2004) p52

Tansey (2004) describes politics as a broad range of situations in which people's objectives vary, but in which they work together to achieve those aims they have in common as well as competing where aims conflict. In his view, both co-operation and competition may involve bargaining, argument and coercion. Crucially, he sees the art of political behaviour as being in the potential for building alliances rather than antagonism among different groups. Vigoda (2000) posits that organisations are social entities that involve a struggle for resources, personal conflicts, and a variety of tactics executed by individuals and groups to obtain benefits and goals in different ways. In that sense, Vigoda argues that much as politics at work is a complex issue, it is crucial for understanding of organisations. Oade (2009) on the other hand, views organisational politics and political behaviour in terms of,

staff engaging in power struggles, pursuing hidden agendas, promoting their egos and ambitions, exclusion and inclusion of some people, taking credit for other people's work, jockeying for positions, duplicity and outright sabotage of opponents. Oade, A. (2009) p5

However, Oade also sees politics at work as a fact of life in which politics can both constrain and enable improved performance. For example, she argues that understanding political and personal agendas, motivations and behaviours of key players at work and responding effectively to them is one way in which a manager can have genuine influence in the workplace. Latif et al (2011) describe organisational politics as those actions not officially approved by an organisation and taken to influence others to meet one's personal goals.

Citing the work of Pfeffer (1981), Wickenberg and Kylen (2004) posit that the fundamental driver of organisational politics is conflict of interest. They also cite the work of Miles (1980) as they contend that organisational political activities occur in the presence of ambiguous goals, scarce resources, changes in technology and organisational change. Wickenberg and Kylen argue that there is proactive political behaviour and reactive political behaviour. They see the former as prevalent at senior levels where managers proactively seek to assert control and the latter at lower levels where junior staff members push back in subtle ways some threatening changes. Lincoln et al (2010) refer to political behaviour in



organisations as social relations involving authority and power, as well as how groups and individuals gain and exercise power. The way I make sense of the characterisations of organisational politics and political behaviour by these writers is that they include all forms of social relations and ways in which power is functionalised in securing interests and influence in daily interactions. The writers take as their central point the primacy of local interaction in social relations and how reality emerges from those relationships. I recognise that this sort of politics with a small “p” occurs at all levels of society including organisations, but conventional management theory somehow rejects its role in shaping the reality of management practice.

The views of Buchanan and Badham (2008) on the role of political behaviour in management are particularly interesting for my study. They raise three basic questions: 1) why do people play political games at work and what triggers organisation politics (antecedents); 2) how is politics played, what tactics are used (behaviours); 3) what are the consequences of political behaviour and what impact does politics have on organisational change (consequences). They identify some of the antecedents as self interests, concealed motives, personal ambition, desires to convey certain appearances, retribution, protesting, desire to dominate and many others. On behaviours, they include tendencies to build networks and alliances, blaming others, breaking rules or working in the margins of those rules, withholding vital information, gossip, spreading rumours about others, putting down colleagues in meetings, excluding others, self-promotion, and using threats, rewards and coercion to win support. They also identify both functional and dysfunctional consequences of political behaviour at work. The functional ones include success in changing things, building effective power circles, winning support for key decisions, career advancement and personal rewards. The dysfunctional ones include personal fallout, frustration, loss of power, damaged credibility, and sometimes a job loss.

Much as these characteristics may appear to portray a negative view of people’s behaviours, I find them to be reflecting ordinary and relevant attributes of human behaviour and they are all part of who we are as individuals and groups. I think that the negativity helps to bring out the reality of human behaviour that tends to be

overlooked in the field of management theory and practice. As socially formed agents, people do not choose which of these attributes should be part of them. They emerge from local human interaction as part of our primary and secondary socialisation. They cannot be left at the door when one gets into the office. Stacey (2010) equally argues that our behaviours emerge from the various social games, informed by our social experiences; in which we are immersed as we interact locally, and unconsciously reflecting the generalisations and idealisations of our society. Those generalisations and idealisations span across a whole fabric of each society, and include both acceptable and unacceptable propositions of each society. Scott (1990) also helps us to understand this complexity of human behaviour through his discussion of public (on-stage) and hidden (off-stage) transcripts, in which people interact in power relationships of the dominant and subordinate. He posits that the more unequal the power relations, the more hidden transcripts are employed.

Interestingly, a number of writers bemoan the fact that the traditional management discourse does not pay sufficient attention to organisational power and politics; noting that political behaviour is portrayed as negative and dysfunctional in organisations, Buchanan and Badham (2008); Butcher and Clarke (2001); Oade (2009); Latif et al (2011); Wickenberg and Kylen (2004). However, Ferris et al (2007) acknowledge that:

The organisational politics literature, frequently cast in pejorative sense, has begun to recognise that politics are not necessarily bad, and those who engage in influence do not always do so exclusively in self-interested manner, and in direct opposition to organisational objectives. Ferris et al (2007) p198

In some sense, I saw the behaviour of senior managers in my department as primarily seeking to build alliances with both politicians and staff; sometimes using language as a weapon for seeking to control staff members' ways of thinking and behaving. I saw management exhibiting political behaviour based on both their hierarchical and resource power bases, in which subtle coercion was transmitted in the day to day communication. I recall an incident in which a ministerial submission was leaked to the press. It was not made clear to staff who had done this

and why but a very strong message came down from a senior manager to all staff via the department's website. "I want to stress how seriously we view this breach of trust. We must all, as civil servants, live up the principles of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality – as set out in the civil service code and values". He further declared, "this leak could damage not only our reputation as a Department, but also the trust that has been built up between officials and our Ministers since the election". Although I never got to know who leaked the information and why, the act of leaking information does seem to suggest some behaviour consistent with protest and resistance to what was going on. Scott (1990) refers to the art of resistance in which the subordinates resort to hidden transcripts and other damaging behaviours against the dominant groups. Wickenberg and Kylen (2004) coin this behaviour reactive political behaviour by lower level staff.

### **Location in conventional management theory**

Casting my mind back to conventional management theory that I have gained in my past academic studies and management training, I find credence in the claim that political behaviour is portrayed as misplaced and unwarranted in management practice. As I noted above, Oade (2009) makes this observation. Further evidence of how organisational politics is seen as negative and contrary to best management practice is found in Stone (1997), who, for example, observes that:

organisational politics refers to all the game-playing, snide, 'them and us', aggressive, sabotaging, negative, blaming, withholding, non-cooperative behaviour that goes on in hundreds of interactions every day in the organisation. Stone, B. (1997) p106

Political behaviour is seen as falling outside managerial practice where only rules, roles, responsibilities, procedures, accountabilities and authority are assumed to be the bases for social interaction. Stone (1997); Ferris and King (1991) argue that change agents should avoid politics. Buchanan and Badham on the other hand, contend that political behaviour is inevitable in organisations and as such:

An understanding of politics, combined with a willingness and ability to engage with organisational political processes, are indispensable attributes of effective change agent. Buchanan, D. A. and Badham, R. J. (2008) p6

Butcher and Clarke (2001) also see political behaviour in organisations as necessary, as people seek to influence things in ways that are beyond the official range of managerial activities, through lobbying and behind-the-scenes alliance building. They view organisational politics as “battles over just causes” in which contestations are not necessarily about good versus bad, wrong or right ; but about alternative ways of getting things done. My understanding of this is that choosing those courses of action or making those decisions tends to invoke political behaviour based on power relations.

Buchanan and Badham (2008), in particular, lament the portrayal of organisations in management theory as entities characterised only by order, openness, rationality, collaboration and trust. They argue that such characterisation tends to take a rather simplistic and artificial view of people in organisations. This is also the view taken up by Butcher and Clarke (2001) who regard this conventional view of management as the “rational mindset”. They argue that a rational mindset view is behind the myth of organisational culture in which unrealistic levels of collaboration and misuse of formal authority to quash dissent and conflict are prevalent and regarded as the norm. Such conventional management theories treat organisations as systems in which people only function and behave in accordance with set policies, structures, legalities, roles, responsibilities, duties, procedures, codes of conduct and values. In such systems, hierarchical power relations are constructed and the behaviour of staff is only accepted within the confines of these formal institutional settings of authority, values, organisational culture, mission statements, corporate vision and performance management systems. This way of viewing people in organisations raises fundamental questions about how people as individuals, groups, communities and societies become who they are; their knowledge, attitudes, behaviour and actions.

My view is that, the idea of portraying people as rational creatures, guided by reason, facts, and calculations alone, is tantamount to denying them their real

selves; and only allows us to see the rational fraction of individual and group behaviours. The way I make sense of this is that the normative conventional approach to management practice constrains and limits our understanding of the subject of management. It leads us to accept a less than real view of management practice. For indeed, people are socially formed; and become who they are and how they make sense of their world from their experiences and daily social interaction. Ultimately, this is what shapes human behaviour even at work places. Management practice can only get richer by embracing all the dimensions of human behaviour, including understanding and demonstrating productive political behaviour.

### **Intensified political behaviour**

Meanwhile, senior management continued to demonstrate remarkable changes in mindset and practice. For instance, they started talking about the private sector as the engine for development where only a few weeks before they used to emphasise effective states. In one such meeting, the head of the department told staff that using language like ‘back office’ as opposed to ‘frontline’ undermines the fact that the department needs everyone’s contribution. “As we strive to be more efficient, and demonstrate value for money and impact, everyone in the department will be working in the frontline”. In meetings, we were told that words such as evidence, impact, indicators, value-for-money, private sector, and results should be used more and that describing our work as complex and difficult to measure would not be accepted.

These messages came down to staff in very forceful ways. I was trying to make sense of what was going on in the department. Certain levels of middle management took up the role of gate keepers for the new way of thinking. For example, I was constantly blocked in getting a new programme document to the approving manager. The reason given was that I had not demonstrated sufficient evidence of how best practice in capacity strengthening works and how the result can be assessed in measurable outcomes and impacts. I was told that I should show how the theory of change model is going to be applied.

This theory of change model had been developed by a hired consultant and it basically argues that if we put in £X into an intervention, the outputs will be Y, the outcomes will be Z and the impact will be Q. As far as possible, this had to be reduced into econometric indicators that demonstrate value-for-money. I pointed out to my team that processes of social change are more complex than the idea portrayed by the linear causality assumptions in the theory of change model. It completely misses the role of people's mindsets, attitudes and behaviours in facilitating social change. I suggested that we make a case to senior management to exercise caution in the use of this model. The response I got was: "In another organisation that would be possible, but this is a target driven system and we have got to follow". This matter came up again during my one-to-one discussion with my line manager. He asked me how things were going, to which I responded by expressing a degree of anxiety about the obsession with measurable results and indicators. My line manager cleared his throat and told me in frank terms that, "in the current environment, this is no time for bringing up intellectual thoughts but to deliver what the boss wants". I was completely gutted but realised that he too was doing just that: pleasing his boss. His boss was pleasing his boss. I realised that that is in fact what each of us was now doing. How was it possible that we were all playing along in this game of pleasing our bosses? I will come back to this in the next paragraphs.

I heard staff murmurs about management's obsession with econometric results. One day, after listening to a harangue by a senior director at a staff training seminar on results and value-for-money, a colleague who, after a quick look around to see who was within earshot, whispered to me in frustration: "This Department is turning into a fantasy land for sure". This was a kind of remark he would not dare repeat in public because it would not be taken kindly by senior management. I was reminded of the views of Natsios (2010) who summed up his frustrating experience in the United States Agency for International Development by coining this way of thinking, the 'Obsessive Measurement Disorder' (OMD). His principal concern was the "gradual erosion of focus" on development programme implementation. At the same training seminar, a senior manager in my Department cynically also called this new results obsession "hitting the target and missing the point" approach, clearly departing from his official line.

Much as results of work need to be measured, I felt that there is a point at which processes of social change cannot be measured in precise and quantifiable terms, without losing meaning. McMillan (2008) equally warns that the use of quantitative measurements and statistical data can capture changes in production processes and various inputs and outputs but managers should not rely on such approaches to tell them the whole story. Itzkowitz (1996) also contends that “history and social change does not follow a predetermined logic”, and as such emerges unpredictably from social interaction in which dynamic relationships between micro and macro processes create reality. Stacey (2007; 2010) refers to complex responsive processes in which social change emerges from local interaction from which in turn local and population-wide patterns are forming at the same time. Therefore, the notion of econometric and quantifiable indicators implied in the theory of change model would be questionable as ways of understanding changes in social phenomena. I would argue that it is simply not possible to pre-plan human interaction in advance, except for artificial settings such as theatre and films.

There were signs that some senior managers did not like the new way of doing business but it was politically naïve to openly challenge it. The ministers wanted it that way and senior management signed up to it and we all had to please our bosses for our survival and self interests. The civil service code demands that we comply. My sense is that to the extent that compliance served our purposes, we seemed eager to do so, and in those matters in which compliance worked against us, we did not fully comply – but still gave the impression that we did comply.

To my mind, this cynical view also highlights the classic problem of management in public organisations: that is, compliance with rules and procedures versus substance of the results produced. Sometimes staff members feel safer to follow the correct rules and procedures of doing the work and not worry much about the results coming out of the work. The way I see this is that, it is a case of what gets rewarded gets done. In other words, if staff members get rewarded for complying with rules and procedures, they would do everything in their power to comply. Similarly, if the staff members feel that results are rewarded more than compliance,

they will be more innovative and pay particular attention to getting the desired results. Equally, if staff members find themselves in a game of pleasing bosses for their own good, they will willingly participate in the game of hypocrisy and posturing. Itzkowitz (1996) warns that wide-spread hypocrisy in large groups can turn into a kind of collective self-deception; which, in my view, could be unhelpful in management practice.

### **Fear and shame**

Although senior management often exhorted staff “to challenge our way of working in order to remain at the cutting edge of our practice”, it appeared staff did not always feel free to take up this invitation. I felt that staff did not get convinced that the invitation was genuine, given the totality of gestures from management to staff. For example, outside the official meetings, colleagues pointed out to me that being outspoken against new ideas is seen as resistance to change and is one sure way for one to be consigned to the ‘Siberian’ section of the organisation. The ‘Siberian’ section is the staff ‘redeployment pool’ where all staff waiting to move to new posts are accommodated. The perception in the Department is that the more you pass through this pool and the longer you stay there, the less relevant you are in the organisation. It is particularly considered a major humiliation for a manager to pass through the redeployment pool. There is a sense of shame and inadequacy associated with being pool staff. Resisting change is one good reason one could find him/herself in the pool. In my view, this explains why going against the grain is considered too risky.

In my view the role of fear and shame in constraining human behaviour should not be underestimated. In times of change such as what I was experiencing in my department, individuals use both fear and shame to manipulate given situations in their favour. Stacey (2007) says that “threats of exposure and exclusion involved in organisational surveillance techniques and organisational change trigger feelings of insecurity and shame that can have a big impact on what people do in organisations”. Speaking out against changes brought out the prospect of being excluded and possibly sent to the re-deployment pool and be shamed. As such, fear and shame became weapons of social control in the sense that staff members had to



self censor themselves during social interaction within the department. Personal survival and safety became the defence baseline position for every individual in the department, while we all looked for ways of attacking and gaining an advantage in the change game.

Was this change in language driven by professionalism and values of impartiality, honesty, integrity and objectivity enshrined in the code of conduct? Over lunch, I engaged a colleague in my professional group on this issue to find out what she thought about the new practice. She told me that there were two possible ways of looking at this phenomenon. On one hand, there are certain managers who were seeing opportunities for hijacking the change agenda in order to shore up their careers, and on the other, senior management may be under pressure to please politicians who have to pacify a restive electorate in the wake of cuts to public spending.

Reflecting on her first observation, it made a lot of sense to me. In the last twelve months, there were a number of staff who moved from professional jobs into middle management positions, in which new roles, they quickly became gate-keepers and champions of the new order and way of thinking. They took up much of the new language of value-for-money, indicators, results, transparency and impact and made it their daily chore to functionalize it in every way possible. I recall a number of team leaders in this category who, almost as if by training, would always mention the name of Jacob , the new divisional head, in every statement they made in explaining what was going on. It became a way of legitimizing the new order. Name dropping and repeated use of the new language of evidence, indicators, results, value-for-money, and transparency characterised every conversation they engaged in. In turn, some of the team leaders' names were often cited in the numerous newsletters from senior management, being credited with making things happen in the Department. The new language defined the in-groups and the out-groups. This behaviour of senior management and the middle managers appeared to reinforce each other in ways that generated mutual benefit.

## **Further reflections**

My sense of the on-goings in my department is that the behaviours of staff members and management were not necessarily intentional, rational or reflecting deliberate and planned choices, nor the ethos of the civil service management code. The behaviours were emerging as a pattern from the local interaction of the staff, as they deciphered meanings from our on-going conversations and re-configured new realities and power relations in a difficult change process. Brandon and Seldman (2004) call this organisational politics in which “informal, unofficial, and sometimes behind-the-scenes efforts to sell ideas, influence an organisation, increase power, or achieve targeted objectives” shape the pattern of local interaction. Stacey (2007, 2010) calls this communicative interaction and power relating during complex responsive processes. In Stacey’s view, the iterative processes take the form of transformative causality, which is paradoxical in that individuals are forming the social while being formed by it at the same time. This view is also taken up by other writers (Burkitt, 2009; Mead, 1934; Elias, 1991) who see human beings as socially formed selves, who emerge from the history of relationships and structures of human networks in which as nodal points, they develop and live as individuals. Burkitt contends that as “temporal beings, each moment of interaction with others contains a trace of something that is past, whether this is a body memory or habit being called into action”. The managers in my Department were interacting among themselves and the rest of staff on the basis of their histories, multiple intentions, emotions, interests, fears, plans and private agendas and this is what was shaping our behaviours and meanings as individuals and groups in the organisation. Our behaviours were increasingly becoming political as we sought personal survival and self-preservation in the face of uncertainty and threatening changes. Some political behaviour appeared to intensify with the level and complexity of the change process.

In the wider management discourse, this would mean that in seeking to understand the nature of managerial practice and behaviours of managers and staff members in my department, I have to seek to understand both their constructive and destructive forms of behaviour. In normative and rationality-based management theory, certain forms of behaviour that include self-interest, deceit, subterfuge, pursuit of moral

ideals and personal glory are regarded as destructive and portrayed in pejorative terms. As already noted above, conventional and normative management theory rejects and therefore rules out the role of destructive forms of behaviour in shaping the arena of management practice. However, the reality of my organisation seems to be pointing out that change management cannot be understood fully without sound knowledge of the role of political motives, agendas and behaviour. Managerial practice in my Department is primarily but not necessarily shaped by nor can it only be understood in terms of the legislative and administrative framework of civil servants code of conduct. It requires the unpacking of the local interactions during complex responsive processes of human relating. Elias (2000) seems to reinforce this point when he asserts that the basic tissue resulting from many single plans and actions of men can give rise to changes and patterns that no individual person has planned or created. I am arguing that political behaviour, destructive or constructive, is part of the narrative on management practice and theory. People in organisations are not only informed by facts and figures, the truth and logic, but by every meaning they attach to what is happening around and within themselves. Those meanings are derived from the staff's own experiences and the social stimuli during social interaction - from which individuals and groups act upon via gestures and responses.

I am positing that management practice falls in the category of social interaction, albeit, in formal settings – but the subjectivity and informality of the social is always present. People are always interacting in their lives in ways that are political. However, some political behaviour in individuals and groups tends to be amplified and accentuated in certain contexts such as organisational settings in which conflicting ideas, control and power relations, recognition, rewards and resources form the basis of contestations.

Another way of understanding the managers' behaviours during the changes is that the departmental institutions were being gradually re-shaped as politicians, senior management and staff members were concurrently experiencing shifts in attitudes, behaviour and actions. Senior management clearly wanted to please the politicians because it was in their interest to be seen as trusted allies. The new ministers also wanted to gain effective control of and smooth entry into the Department, and as

such, they wanted the cooperation of the senior management. There are aspects of the managers conduct that can be better understood as political behaviour. This type of behaviour seems to be confirmed by Tansey (2004)'s observation that:

the behaviour of bureaucrats is not seen in constitutional terms as giving impartial policy advice to ministers, but seen as seeking to maximise their agency budgets in order to maximise their own power, salary and prestige.  
Tansey, S. (2004) p16

Mead (1934) similarly points to how individuals take up the attitude of the “generalised other” as the pattern of social institutions are organised and re-organised. Berger and Luckmann (1966) go further on this notion of taking up the attitudes of the “significant other” during both primary (childhood) and secondary (post-childhood) socialisation. In Berger and Luckmann's view, “primary socialisation creates in the child's consciousness a progressive abstraction from the roles and attitudes of specific others to roles and attitudes in general” whereas secondary socialisation is seen as “internalisation of institutional or institution-based sub-worlds in which individuals acquire role specific knowledge”. The staff members who moved from professional grades into middle management roles of team leaders were experiencing secondary socialisation in which they were taking the attitudes of senior management and old team leaders.

The way I understand it is that management and staff in my department were experiencing some form of secondary socialisation in which they had to adapt to and be part of co-creating the emerging new realities. The socialisation that staff and management had experienced under the Labour government was now being threatened and replaced by that of the new coalition government. That process of replacing one form of socialisation with another is problematic and potentially generates risk and vulnerability in the less powerful participants; and on its own, can generate reactive political behaviour of sabotage and subterfuge. As Berger and Luckmann argue, socialisation is never complete but carries on for life, as the current contents of past socialisation face continuing threats to their subjective reality. I am suggesting that the Structural Reform Plan and the numerous initiatives brought in under the new government could be seen as the process of

embedding change by institutionalising new behaviours and rules of the game. On this basis, I am arguing that, the affective character of social interaction during continuous secondary socialisation, such as, the shifts in roles, changes in working spaces and patterns, reporting arrangements, contract terms, and sense of job security in my department generated conflict and political behaviour aimed at securing personal survival and self preservation. I am suggesting that the tempo of social interaction that was shaping the pattern of change in my Department is best understood as accentuated political behaviour, during organisational change and management practice.

It also appears that the Ministers and senior management's perception of anger and discomfort in the country's public mood was playing into the re-patterning of management practice in our department. My sense is that the new vocabulary and regimentation in the language of value for money and results emerged to sooth that public anger and simultaneously accommodate the conflictual interests of politicians, senior management and staff members. One team leader aptly summed it up when he said, "We have got to use the language that suits our masters". I was not surprised when a colleague told me that senior management now pay more attention to words mentioned the most by the ministers while team leaders do the same with the senior managers. These are the words that are then taken up and passed down the line of command, getting functionalised in various ways. Interestingly, Heywood (2004) posits that language is not simply a means of communication, it is a social and political weapon, often shaped and honed to convey political intent. It reflects power structures and relations in society and organisations and tends to discriminate in favour of dominant groups and against subordinate ones. Runciman (2008) also talks about how certain types of language are used as metaphors of masking and concealment of reality. As I see it, language that falls into this category include, position titles, management platitudes, brands, corporate values and identity labels, corporate rhetoric and histories that are often used for grandstanding, posturing and dressing up unpleasant realities in organisations. I felt that this new language of value for money, results, indicators, impact and transparency was meant to simplify and represent the infinite complexities of our working world in ways that helped politicians tell better stories to the electorate.

The head of the Department launched several initiatives to review programmes and systems of delivering services as part of the Structural Reform Plan, earlier announced by the politicians in the new government.

In giving guidance to the process of developing the results framework for my Department, the divisional head told the team leaders to “under-promise and over deliver”. I asked a team leader what this meant, and he explained that “by promising clear and easy to measure results, we would then appear to be delivering quick results and demonstrating value-for-money in our performance reports” for the taxpayer. I pressed the team leader to justify this way of working, and he said that “this is a political cover and is part of the tactical game” in the department. Yet another one of those metaphors of masking and concealment, I thought.

### **Battle for visibility and recognition**

Another of the senior management initiatives was a plan to regularly report to ministers some stories of impact in order to show how aid was working but also as a way of showing which team, group or division was doing better than the others. Each team was required to produce a set of stories for the divisional head to share with other directors at the weekly senior management meetings. One team leader reminded us that we should bring “stories with a WOW factor” He said that this was important because “our director needs to report on good scientific evidence stories to counter the other directors who simply report on exciting events and processes”. As a result of this call by management, each one of us came under sustained pressure by team leaders to bring up stories that demonstrate impact and value for money. I saw a number of project managers scouring through websites and project documents and making frantic telephone calls to project staff looking for success stories for senior management. Managers were demanding stories to outdo each other not just in the eyes of the ministers, but also to outdo each other at the senior management and operational levels as well. This behaviour of seeking to boost appearance of success was being repeated at all levels, driven by survival instincts and perverse incentives, with individuals wanting to be, for example,

credited with facilitating change. I feared the organisation might be driving itself towards a mirage of success.

The way I make sense of this is that managers often get so absorbed in polishing up communication tools in the organisation and fail to see that the overall context in which social interaction will be taking place is not conducive to healthy conversations. Mainstream management theory emphasises the use of communication strategies and tools that tend to gloss over real issues arising in daily conversations in the organisation. For example, at one stage, my Department had a total staff compliment of 120 people performing communication duties at one level or another. Even with that, more and more employees in my organisation still frequently raised problems about communications and managers responded by designing even more communication tools, in what amounts to an endless game of a dog chasing its own tail. Chomsky (2002) attributes this obsession with communications to a desire to control the public mind, which he argues, has contributed to the growth of the public relations industry in the world. In his view,

propaganda when supported by educated classes and when no deviation is permitted from it, can have a big effect. Chomsky, N. (2002) p13

Chomsky believes that this is how Adolf Hitler kept his domestic support prior to and during the Second World War. In my Department, various high profile personalities and senior academics were lined up to come and preach messages aligned to the new ideology of cuts in public spending as a way of embedding the new way of thinking. To my mind, managers tend to be equally under pressure to develop communication strategies akin to propaganda in order to maintain support for their way of thinking.

How political behaviour can help us understand the organisation of today

Looking at the amount of change that I have experienced in my department in the last six years, and in particular, the last twelve months, my sense is that the era of the stable organisation fortified in bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, and controlled by mazes of procedures, rules and regulations may be over. Stable

organisations do not seem to exist any more and managers who function on the basis of a rational and normative mindset are at risk of missing a key factor needed for delivering on their mandates. For example, Irene, a new work colleague, told me that since she joined the policy Division in my Department ten months ago, she has changed her job title 3 times and the name of her team has changed two times as part of the structural changes being introduced. I have experienced turbulence, uncertainty, and discontinuity at every level of interaction in the Department. Career paths are constantly shifting, jobs re-advertised and incumbents asked to reapply, resources being shifted around, working teams formed and dismantled without notice, loyalties shifting as personalities come and go. During these changes, I have witnessed academic qualifications and office titles no longer able to guarantee a person a job. Flexible multi-skilled teams working through innovation, creativity and dynamic relationships have replaced the stable and bureaucratic structures. In these new teams, individual performance is now much more difficult to measure and sometimes the appearance of success has become just as important for career progression.

In a sense, I can relate the latter point to Machiavelli (1992)'s view that "it is not essential that a Prince should have all the good qualities, but it is essential that he should seem to have them". His argument is that "everyone sees what you seem, but few know what you are". That is the heart of local interaction patterning daily management practice in my Department. To my mind, implementing these changes in the department is drawing the best from each of us in terms of survival, self-preservation and pursuit of success. Much as our behaviours were reflecting our individual primary and secondary socialisation, they were also being formed by our local interactions. The emerging political behaviours were inextricably linked to how, as individuals and as groups, we were experiencing the change processes.

The point I am making here is that managing change, therefore, necessarily has to take as its starting point, the totality of human behaviour during social interaction at local and global levels. The way I understand it is that human behaviour is currently almost completely overshadowed by the over-reliance on tools and techniques imposed by mainstream management theory. I am suggesting that, instead of treating political behaviour as falling outside the legitimate remit of management



theory, as widely advocated in main stream management training programmes, we need to embrace that behaviour as a key factor that can constrain and enable the field of management practice. My narrative is demonstrating that a significant part of the local social interaction during the change process in my Department was taking place off-stage as hidden transcript and individuals and groups were engaging in political behaviour not normally acceptable under the civil service code of conduct and conventional management theory.

## **Conclusion**

Based on my own experience, the reality in my organisation and perspectives from literature, the current bifurcation of management practice and political behaviour in management theory is both unhelpful and conceptually defective. I have observed and experienced that social interaction, including at work, inevitably involves people acting with hidden agendas and transcripts, constantly negotiating in ever-shifting power relationships, carrying various levels of personal egos and ambitions, jockeying for positions and trying to impress their bosses, as well as other competitive behaviours around control of resources and discourses. This is politics within and without the workplace. To be effective at work not just as a manager, but any member of staff, one needs to identify, understand and properly interpret and respond to the political context of the workplace. Managerial competency demands both technical skills and astute political behaviour to be effective at work. I do not get the sense that the civil service management code reflects this reality. The code seems to be constructed on a normative basis in which staff members are expected to leave behind their personal feelings, meanings and personal motivations out of the workplace, from the day that they take up appointment to the service.

The conventional management theory of change emphasises managerial control in which a rational approach is employed to set out a vision, a mission statement, a strategic plan and implementation road map. The change is seen as happening on the basis of clear objectives, fully justified and evaluated options, and of course, the best option that maximises the objectives. My narrative seems to confirm that

change emerges from what we are already doing and like sailors at sea, we have got to change things while we sail.

To my mind, the experience in my department raises serious questions about these traditional, classical, mechanistic views of change and change management models. Whereas some traditional views and models assume that organisational change is predictable, linear, incremental, controllable and therefore can be planned in advance, I found out that this particular change did not fit into that way of thinking. I argue that the level of complexity in the modern social, economic, technological and political business environment cannot be fully understood and managed on the basis of the rational models espoused in the conventional management theories alone. The contemporary business environment is experiencing change that is unprecedented, unpredictable, continuous, turbulent, none easily-controllable, particularly given the dynamic behaviours of both staff members and management.

Current change management models do not sufficiently recognise nor fully reflect the complexity and role of political behaviour in shaping the reality of the management arena, particularly the dynamic elements of human behaviour during local interaction. Key messages emerging from my narrative are that 1) political behaviour is inextricably fused with management practice, particularly during processes of complex change and a better understanding of this behaviour increases our understanding of management practice; 2) political skills and tactics can both constrain and enable actors during change processes; and 3) As socially formed entities engaged in management practice, people cannot simply be seen as neutral, rational beings guided by facts, figures, logic and designed systems alone, but by all other affective factors during complex responsive processes of local interactions. Further research would be required to drill further down to the role of social interaction at micro-level in management practice and theory.

## CHAPTER 5

### Synopsis

#### Introduction

The synopsis presents a critical appraisal of my four research projects. I have identified the themes running through the research work and the methods, theories and practices employed in the research. I present a brief outline of the key points and arguments emerging from my four research projects and some indication of how my thoughts and practice developed and how this is ultimately shaping my main arguments and conclusions. Finally, I have also identified the contribution that my research is making to knowledge and professional practice. I use a narrative methodology in my research work. I have outlined how reflexivity is helping me to engage myself with my own ways of thinking during the research.

#### Management as patterning of human relationships

There is significant literature available on management theory and there are innumerable training programmes on management best practices in the world. The theory of management itself goes far back into history and arguably can best be seen as a history of human relationships. The evolution of management is fascinating and revealing, for it reflects society and its constantly changing characteristics. It explains the dominant culture of the time, and is a reflection of the political, economic, social, technological, international, and ecological issues of the time. It also reflects human power relations as they constantly shift. Some of the notable contributions to management theory and practice include the early writings of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC (military strategies and conquests), Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* in 1513 (leaders using fear and manipulation to maintain control over people), Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776 (efficient organisation of work through specialisation to create wealth for owners), Frederick W. Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911, Peter Drucker's *Concept of Corporation* in 1946 (scientific management to

improve productivity). Both Taylor and Drucker portray scientific management as the organized study of work, the analysis of work into its simplest elements and systematic management of a worker's performance of each element. It was from this understanding, for example, that Drucker came up with the tool of "management by objectives" (MBO) which was subsequently institutionalised by many business training programmes. Meanwhile, the world of international development saw Leon J. Rosenberg (1969) introduce *The Logical Framework Approach* for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The approach was functionalised through widespread training and use of the *Logframe*, a management tool for planning and implementing development projects. It sets out upfront the key assumptions, planned activities, the planned outputs, the planned purpose and the planned goal or impact of each project. The Logframe works on a series of connected propositions that say:

If these *Activities* are implemented, and these *Assumptions* hold, then these *Outputs* will be delivered

If these *Outputs* are delivered, and these *Assumptions* hold, then this *Purpose* will be achieved.

If this *Purpose* is achieved, and these *Assumptions* hold, then this *Goal* will be achieved.

### Questions about using tools

The Logframe has since been widely adopted by most development organisations. However, the logframe's major weakness is its assumption of linear causality in processes where human agents are involved. It is based on the "if, then" logic. To my mind the question that arises is just how valid is this logic in the activities of human agents. The tool is seen as oversimplifying the development process, including that:

Logframes can function to sideline the politics and messiness of development itself, reinforcing (and generating) mechanistic views of the development process in which inputs automatically lead to the specified outputs. Bornstein, L. (2003), p398

Another criticism of the Logframe is that it fails to cope with or simply ignores unintended consequences of the actual actions on the ground. It is often seen as a development management tool imposed by the funding agencies, whose objective is to justify the money spent using measurable indicators. For example,

In cases where funders and their agents have a distaste for reportage beyond the terse numbers neatly set out in the logframe's rows and columns, insights of real value are highly vulnerable. Harley, K. (2005) p32

Equally, Carpenter et al (2009) built on the work of Henri Fayol (1918) by presenting the P-O-L-C framework (for planning, organising, leading and controlling) as a tool for representing the management functions. The planning is seen as encompassing the visioning, strategizing and goal setting. The organising is understood as covering the organisational development, culture and human relations. The leading is seen as representing leadership, decision-making, communications, team building and employee motivation, while the controlling is understood as encompassing organisational systems and flow of resources. The question for me is what actually happens during each of these functions.

Michael Porter (1980) in his landmark book, *Competitive Strategy*, portrays management of organizations in abstract terms such as five competitive forces of strategy, clusters and capabilities and sees all these as perfectly 'leveragable' tools and therefore predictable and transferable. He then reifies these abstract notions of an organisation at the expense of paying attention to actual human relationships, and thereby making it appear as if managers should not have too many difficulties crafting and deploying their strategies, as long as the tools are correct.

A major criticism of these management tools, more generally, is that they put too much emphasis on tasks and their measurement and very little attention on people relationships. Much of the theory behind the best practices and management tools today is based on a discourse that has been around for many decades and which has been formalised and institutionalised as the right way of managing. This discourse views managers and members of staff as parts of organisational systems. The manager's job is seen as that of building a capable organisation by selecting

competent people for key positions, building core competencies and competitive capabilities, structuring the organisation around the strategy, linking budgets to the strategy, developing supportive policies and procedures, implementing best practices, installing supportive systems, tracking performance, supportive staff compensation systems, linking rewards to key performance outcomes of the strategy, building organisational culture, building ethical standards and values into the culture, maintaining visible and inspirational leadership, introducing responsive and innovative capacities, enforcing ethical behaviour, and making corrective adjustments (Thompson and Strickland, 1999). This is understood as a universal approach to best practice in management and as such, appears to be taken as self-evident. Best practices are understood as generally-accepted, formally-standardized techniques, methods or processes that have proven themselves over time to accomplish given tasks. The idea is that with proper processes, checks and testing, a desired outcome can be delivered more effectively with fewer problems and unforeseen complications. But what is the reality of actual management practice.

A number of writers, however, have questioned some of the taken-for-granted views on management. Wagner-Tsukamoto (2007) questions the assumptions behind the scientific management, arguing that inherent conflict of interests between management and workers create a context in which humans interact with emotions and feelings rather than logic or rationale. Others such as Alvesson and Willmott (1996); Menssen, (1993) have called for more open and critical thinking on management theory, arguing that management is not an objective science and cannot be detached from power. They see scientific management as a classical view of objective rationality where things are seen as measurable and there is always a correct answer and the solution can be found in one of the management tools. They contend that this way of thinking is based on the assumption that there is managerial power to control just about everything. People are seen as instruments or machines that managers can deploy and control to accomplish pre-determined outcomes. To my mind, the issue of managerial power and control over human agents needs to be interrogated.

## **Locating individual human relationships in management**

In Project 1, the research focused on my work in a Ministry of Finance in a national government where I was struggling to cope with planning and implementing an economic structural adjustment programme in line with government policy commitments. As a member of efficiency units that reviewed the structure of government and the relevant mandates of each ministry in relation to world best practices, I experienced first hand the complexities of making changes in the public sector. My team executed the work in accordance with our terms of reference for the change. However, no sooner had we compiled a detailed technical report proposing major changes than we were summoned to the office of the highest political office, only to be told that we were going beyond our terms of reference. Even though we had clear terms of reference and technical capacity to develop change plans, we had not fully understood the context of the change environment. Our own permanent secretary turned against us when he realised that key politicians were against the proposed changes. There were deep seated political interests and powerful managers in the service who felt threatened by the change project and they used their networks to convince politicians against implementing the plans. We had not paid attention to what was going on in our work environment and thought that technical quality and efficiency rationality alone would carry the day.

This experience was repeated later on, not once but three times when I moved into my current Department in another country. Now this leads me to ask the question: if management is a straight forward scientific practice as espoused by Taylor (1911); Carpenter et al (2009); Thompson and Strickland (1999), how can we explain the failure of managers in my department to deliver their intended strategic plans. In fact, Mintzberg (1987) suggested that only 10-30% of intended strategy is realized and the rest emerges from what is going on. This suggests that we need a better understanding of what actually goes on during real management practice and what this means for individual and group behaviours in organisations.

My enquiry starts from Flyvbjerg (2001)'s argument that in a bid to make management theory a science, certain aspects of a social relations have been either

ignored or simply not well understood. I argue that these social aspects are critical for a fuller understanding of management practice. As such, these social aspects form the key subject of this research. Citing the work of Dreyfus and Bourdieu (1982), Flyvbjerg says there are six criteria for a theory to be considered scientific and these are that: it must be 1) explicit – clear and in detail to be understood; 2) universal – must apply in all places and at all times; 3) abstract – must not require concrete examples; 4) discrete – formulated only with context-independent elements ; 5) systematic – must constitute a whole in which context-independent elements are related to each other by rules and laws; and 6) complete and predictive – specify the range of variation in the elements and their effects to enable precise prediction.

The question of whether or not current management theories meet all the criteria for being considered a science goes beyond the subject of my enquiry, but my investigation focused on the last three criteria which, I argue, are problematic for thinking about and understanding management practice. My argument is that the social nature of some aspects of management practice cannot adequately be reduced to discrete, systematic, complete and predictive elements without losing some meaning of what we do.

A number of writers provide me with perspectives to support my proposition that we must focus on the individuals and their daily relationships as the right context in which we can understand what actually goes on during management practice. In particular, we need to pay attention to the daily human interactions and power relationships that shape behaviours at work. The current and dominant discourse on management that I have referred to above, in an instrumental fashion, appears to have reduced management to a whole set of normative, rationally-constructed and codified principles, models, tools and techniques of best practice in ways that have blurred the critical human relationships of individuals out of the picture of management theory and practice. This research therefore makes the individuals and their relationships the starting point of the enquiry. As one of those individuals in these relationships, I am using my own experiences and all the subjectivity of that experience to bring out the reality of what actually goes on during management practice. I discuss the validity and reliability of this method in the sections ahead.



## Literature

I contend that since time immemorial, people have always organised themselves in different ways to carry out tasks around their daily lives. Taking management practice as organising of tasks and people to accomplish objectives means that people have always practiced management in all aspects of their lives. However, the main stream discourse on management has tended to treat management as if there is one scientific way of organising tasks and people. The result has been excessive attention to tools and techniques of accomplishing tasks, often at the expense of the understanding human relationships involved in the tasks. The tools and techniques often conflate many issues without regard to the different contexts that human beings form together and for each other. The individuals and the context that they form together and for each other is as important as the tasks involved in management. My research brings up some perspectives of prominent writers and thinkers that include complex responsive processes (Stacey, 2007, 2010); sociology and psychology of how people become who they are and how they make sense of what goes on around them (Elias, 1991; Mead, 1934; Itzkowitz, 1996; Burkitt, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Berger and Luckmann, 1966); power relations (Foucault, 1977, 1994, 2002; Scott, 1990; Elias, 2000). Writers such as Wagner-Tsukamoto (2007), Alvesson and Willmott (1996) and Menssen (1993) provide critical thinking on rational approaches to management. I also bring perspectives of political behaviour inherent in management practice (Buchanan and Badham, 2008; Butcher and Clarke, 2001; Brandon and Seldman, 2004) that help to amplify the complexity of human relationships, particularly in times of change.

Complexity thinking and views of different writers on complexity frame my narrative. Complexity thinking itself is based on complexity science which views the world as comprising phenomena that cannot be understood entirely in terms of simple classical science. Complexity science, therefore, offers open ways of viewing the world (Prigogine, 1996). That is to mean that it is not sufficient to understand and explain the world in terms of order and stability, equilibrium, linearity, predictability and other deterministic models. Instead, complexity thinking accepts that large networks of agents with no central control and simple

rules of operation give rise to complex collective behaviour (Mitchell, 2009). Complexity thinking demonstrates how our ability to predict the future is compromised by the property of nonlinear relationships in which small differences may lead to large amplifications and so unpredictable changes in phenomena (Nicolis and Prigogine, 1989). Taken in the context of social science, the analogy of complexity science offers a perspective in which organisations are understood to be on-going, iterated processes of cooperative and competitive relating between people (Griffin and Stacey, 2005). Complexity thinking in social science helps us to make sense of our every day on-goings as individuals, groups, organisations and society at large.

In terms of research, parts of complexity thinking challenges the classical social theory that an investigator or researcher should be outside a system that he observes; that he or she is objective and independent of the system and that the system itself is subject to deterministic laws. Instead, it offers the view that researchers in social phenomena are both actors and spectators. That means they are both involved and detached from the social phenomena they are studying. According to McMillan (2008), complexity perspectives enable us to explore paradoxes of order and disorder, stability and instability, predictability and unpredictability, rationality and irrationality in social order, as well as the notion of truth and reality. I have found this complexity perspective opening up new ways of understanding social phenomena in general, and strategic management and organisational change in particular.

Some perspectives by a number of writers have influenced my way of thinking about organisations, management and complexity. In different ways, these writers open up conversations about organisations that offer insights based on both traditional and complexity perspectives. Stacey, (2007, 2010) for instance, questions the key assumptions underlying the dominant view of organisations and strategic management and does so by critically questioning the notion that organisations behave as if they are systems. He challenges the validity of those assumptions that cast managers as rational and objective agents standing outside the organisational systems with power to design and direct the organisational systems in ways that suit the managers' own objectives. He argues that organisations do not

behave and cannot simply be understood as systems but as embodiment of on-going conversations within social interaction in which complex responsive processes shape reality. On the other hand, writers such as Carpenter et al (2009); Thompson and Strickland (1999), take up the traditional view of strategic management that portrays organisations as systems in which powerful managers can plan organisational programmes and control people and resources in order to achieve pre-determined goals. Streatfield (2001); Olson and Eoyang, (2001) also explore the role of complexity thinking in understanding organisational change. However, while Stacey (2007, 2010); Streatfield, (2001) do not accept the systemic view of organisations and regard the social interaction as complex responsive processes in which the human agents act in inter-dependent ways, Olson and Eoyang accept the view of organisations as systems and see interaction as complex adaptive systems in which human agents act autonomously and evolve continuously as they adapt to interactions with other systems. I have found the complex responsive perspective more relevant in my research than the complex adaptive system, particularly in view of the uniqueness of all individuals and how they shape each other as they become and behave as human beings.

With respect to sociology, psychology, philosophy and society at large, I have been influenced by such writers as Mead, 1934 (relationship between human psychical construction and society); Goffman, 1959 (behaviour of individuals and groups in public and in private); Elias, 1991 (individual and society interdependence); Foucault, 1977, 1994; Scott, 1990 (power relations); Wooffitt, 2005 (understanding conversations and discourses); Burkitt, 2008, Berger and Luckmann, 1966 (how the self emerges from social relations) and Maslow, 1954 (how individual needs shift from basics to self actualisation). I have also engaged literature on political behaviour in organisations, (Buchanan and Badham, 2008; Brandon and Seldman, 2004; Machiavelli, 1992; Heywood, 2004; Runciman, 2008; Klein, 2008; Butcher and Clarke, 2001). Together these writers provide powerful perspectives on the relationships between and among individuals, groups of individuals, organisations and society that help me to make sense of what actually goes on within communities and other social settings. In particular, Mead, Goffman, Foucault, Burkitt and Elias helped me to bring out the complexities involved in understanding (let alone predicting) and therefore controlling the human mind, social

relationships, behaviours, attitudes and actions. That complexity, as I now understand it, undermines the key assumptions that are made in traditional discourse about managers and their role in planning and controlling people towards pre-determined outcomes.

On development values, ideologies and identities, I have looked at strategic plans and policy guidelines as well as the ever changing business plans drawn up by senior managers in my organisation. My research has also been informed by the views of Mowles, (2007) who, building on the writings of Hans Joas, has written on the role of values in international non-governmental organisations involved in international development. Mowles describes values as voluntary compulsions in which through the power of imagination we are able to experience a wholeness of purpose which we cannot ever realise, but which enlarges our sense of self. I have experienced the role played by values in driving my work in my Department.

In order to bring all these perspectives together, it will help to start by exploring the nexus between the individual and other human networks in society.

## **Analysis and Reflections**

### **Individuals and how they come to understand the world and making sense**

A key philosophical question that Elias (1991) raises is whether society is the end and the individual the means or the individual is the end and society is the means. To my mind, this is a key question in terms of understanding how individuals become who they are and how they relate to each other and their wider social networks, including organisations. My argument is that management revolves around human relationships. The question is: where do we start in seeking to understand these human relationships. Do we start from the individuals and then go onto the groups and social networks that they are part of or do we start with the groups and then go to the individuals that make up the groups? I see these questions equally applying to relationships between individuals and the organisations that they are part of. Elias's response is that:

One can only gain a clear understanding of the relation of individual and society if one includes in it the perpetual growing up of individuals within society, if one includes the process of individualisation in the theory of society. The historicity of each individual, the phenomenon of growing up to adulthood, is the key to an understanding of what society is. Elias, N. (1991), p25

To my mind, this perspective is instructive, not just for how we think about the wider society but, for the parts of society such as organisations and communities and the individuals who are part of them. Elias discounts theories by some writers that socio-historical formations can wholly be understood as phenomena that were rationally and deliberately designed, planned and created by a number of individuals or bodies. He refutes claims that such formations are necessary products of the workings of supra-individual forces that work in pre-set cycles. Elias' key pursuit was in fact:

to understand how it is possible that each individual person is unique and different from all others with whom he or she forms societies of changing structure, and yet with a history that has been brought about by none of the individual people constituting the society. Elias, N. (1991) p75

From Elias's perspective, my argument is that this uniqueness of each individual and his or her social relationships and interactions is part of social phenomena in management practice that cannot be rationally and deliberately designed and planned in advance or understood outside the reality that each individual co-creates with others in the living present. In other words, management practice is context specific and is determined by the human relationships involved.

This individual uniqueness arises from experience and social relationships in daily local interactions with others. It is therefore from this social interaction that individuals develop attitudes, values, identity, meanings and emotions that shape their behaviours and actions. Elias says that every human being goes through a gradual process of differentiation as they grow from childhood to adulthood. It is

my submission and perhaps an undisputed point in human studies that there are no two individuals who are exactly identical in their social construction. Even the biological twins are socially different in spite of being raised under the same family circumstances. I am further arguing that nobody can ever succeed in moulding two individuals into identical social beings with the same attitudes, values, emotions and ways of making sense. If these arguments are valid, it raises the question: how is it possible that anybody can claim that managers in organisations mould human and social behaviour of people in those organisations in accordance with pre-defined parameters. I see a lot of sense in Elias's conclusion that the network of people has an order and is subject to laws more than and different from what the individuals making up this network themselves plan or want. In fact, he contends that:

The human sciences and the general ideas people have of themselves as “individuals” and as “societies” are determined, in their present form, by a situation in which human beings as individuals and as societies import into each other's lives considerable and largely uncontrollable dangers and fears. Elias, E. (1991), p81

In my view, it is imperative that we look at these local interactions that make up individuals, human relationships and management practice in order to make sense of what actually is going on during management and how to improve the practice.

In Project One, therefore, I traced my foot steps from early childhood and how my socialisation moulded me into who I am today and how I make sense of the world. I looked at my life as I was brought up in a rural village in a developing country, which was under colonial rule and saw how power was exercised within my group of friends, my family, community and country. I looked at relationships between individuals, families, communities and how these were formed and informed by our individual and collective identities, culture, values, rules and religion. This took me into my life at school, at university, my church, the learning process and the subject content that shaped my early views of life and the world at large. My very being, my identity, that is the meanings in my native Shona language; the way I understood relationships; the meanings of behaviour and attitudes of people; the

way I understood the role of authority, power, control and the values in people's lives, were all shaped by my social settings and who or what I came into contact with. In short, I looked at how my experiences shaped my view of the world and how I make sense of what goes on around me. My study of the English language gradually connected me with other communities outside my immediate community and the world beyond. Berger and Luckmann (1966) confirm this way of human knowing when they contend that:

The language used in everyday life continuously provides the necessary objectifications and posits the order within which these make sense and within which everyday life has meaning. Berger and Luckmann, (1966), p36

Mead (1934) takes up a similar perspective when he discusses how as individuals, our minds are formed and how we become the selves that are part of society. Mead's view is that:

Mind is the presence in behaviour of significant symbols. It is the internalisation within the individual of social process of communication in which meaning emerge. Mead, G. H. (1934), pXXII

Mead traces meanings and how individuals make sense of their world from social interaction right from the time they are born to adulthood. As demonstrated in my research projects, meanings in social phenomena are neither fixed nor universal and tend to change as experiences and events are told and re-told during social interactions. In Mead's view, the mind, self and society arise simultaneously in the same social conversational process. Through these social interactions, Mead says, people become interdependent. My understanding is that this interdependence calls for human agents to constantly negotiate power relations, based on emerging identity, values, ideologies and other socially constructed ways of thinking. Mead takes a look at social processes and works inward through the importation of the social processes of communication into the individual by medium of gestures and responses. However, the internalisation process is not seen a one-way or linear process in which one occurs first and then the other. Mead postulates that human consciousness and self consciousness emerge in the conversation of gestures and

responses. He posits that one person makes a gesture to another, which calls for a response in the form of a gesture back to the first person – and that process carries on and on. He says that such a conversation of gestures and responses has no starting or end point and cannot be separated from other conversations because together they constitute the meaning of what is going on. To my mind, this way of understanding a person and his/her social relations points us in the direction of what management practice should pay attention to.

### **Emergence of reality**

It is the social interaction that defines and shapes reality. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) tell us,

reality is appended in individual consciousness rather than on reality as institutionally defined. Berger and Luckmann, (1966) p167

I am arguing that reality is not wholly defined by corporate vision, mission or strategic plans or organisational rules – but by the totality of what people actually do together in their daily local interaction within the organisation. This includes the subjective and objective meanings and ways of thinking in individuals and within groups of individuals. Even the ways that abstracts such as organisational vision, mission and strategy are constructed and implemented, need to be understood in terms of on-going human power relations as they are configured in the living present. I am refuting the claim that individuals are autonomous agents in organisations who freely choose rational goals, actions and behaviours on the basis of their reasoning capacity. Instead, I am suggesting that each individual and groups of individuals are constrained and enabled by their own subjective experiences and issues of identity, ideologies, meanings, values and emotions. Management practice as patterning of social interaction is fraught with and deeply enmeshed in these complex human dimensions.

Equally important in this discussion is Mead's view of how the biological and social self in the individual are connected. He contends that:



the transformation of the biologic individual (*at birth*)<sup>11</sup> to the minded organism or self (*in society*) takes place through the agency of language, while language in turn presupposes the existence of a certain kind of society and certain physiological capacities in the individual organisms. Mead, G. H. (1934), pXX

This is a very significant way of thinking about how we as individual people develop from biophysical-animals at birth to social animals in society. Whereas bio-sciences have developed theories of how in-built biophysical properties result in fertilisation, gestation, birth and physical growth of an individual, the development of the social had also tended to be understood in the same way as the biological processes. This may be the basis upon which existing management theories have assumed rational individual minds that are capable of being carefully structured through tools and techniques for pre-determined outcomes. That way of thinking about social development of the individual seems not consistent with growing body of literature. A growing number of thinkers now accept that people socially develop and interact in ways that are subjective and objective, rational and non-rational, logical and non-logical, fair and unfair, emotional and non-emotional, selfish and altruistic. Elias and Mead as well as others such as Berger and Luckmann (1966), Itzkowitz (1996) and Burkitt (2008) portray a paradoxical relationship between an individual and society in which the society changes the individual at the same time that the individual will be changing society. According to Stacey (2007, 2010) this paradoxical relationship is sustained through local interactions that he calls complex responsive processes. The complex responsive processes are at every local level of human interaction and together give rise to global or macro patterns that is the reality of social relations. I am arguing that these complex responsive processes are critical in gaining a better understanding of management practice and could in fact be the key to managers positively influencing what is going on.

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<sup>11</sup> Words in italics are mine for emphasis

## **Collusion and management practice as theatre**

Project Two particularly brought out elements of management as theatre in which managers and staff members participated in organising restructuring through which people had to apply for their existing jobs in order to meet the requirements in the rules. This was seen as a way of technically complying with a change plan crafted as a blueprint. Rigidity of the plan meant that staff members went ahead to feign compliance when in actuality, they were critical of the plan. No manager or member of staff was willing and/or able to openly challenge the unfolding charade because doing so was seen as attracting some consequences such as punishment or exclusion. Staff members appeared to collude in putting up a show in which harmony and stability prevailed.

The experience of my move from a country office to the Head Quarters just after a major political change of government in the United Kingdom and how this impacted on my department and my working context was instructive. I saw a domino effect of this political change as it forced a series of planned and unplanned changes in structures, business processes, attitudes, values, expectations, behaviours and actions within the department and among staff. I experienced scary and chaotic changes in my position and job description alongside other staff members. I saw what initially began as a blueprint change management plan disintegrating into a series of knee jerk management responses to unfavourable and unintended outcomes of the plans. I heard managers speaking in less precise terms about what it is that we wanted to achieve and sounding like air-borne pilots who have lost their navigation instruments. The way I experienced this was that managers' navigation instrument of a blueprint strategy had become less useful during the turbulent changes. Not even the managers were confident about how their own positions were to be affected by the unfolding changes. I felt the air of despondency, disillusionment and dejection during staff meetings, and managers allowed fewer questions to be asked and restricted the types of questions, arguing that some of the issues were still confidential to share with staff.

Staff in my Department resorted to informal meetings in coffee rooms and along the corridors to get the latest gossip of the day about the change. We became more

sceptical about formal communication from management and I felt that my participation in a people's champion forum was increasingly getting less helpful by the day. However, I and many others did not feel safe to pull out or to speak against the planned changes because that could have easily jeopardised our positions. It became difficult to trust the regular assurances coming from senior managers because similar assurances had counted for nothing before. I was experiencing change outcomes that did not resemble those projected in the strategic plans of the organisation. This was how social interaction was shaping reality of strategy development and implementation within my Department.

The first thing that I found through my experience is that change is continuous and does not always turn out as intended. Changes have been occurring in my Department since I joined it more than a decade ago. In fact, I found that change arises from the interaction of many disparate factors, none of which are controlled by any one person or group of persons. Changes in my Department have been shaped by factors ranging from effects of global recession to domestic politics and local community issues to appointment of new ministers. Even where there may be intentions, they tend to be multiple intentions of different people. My experiences in these projects confirm that change projects bring different meanings to different people. The change plans are presented as blueprints for change in which the future is already decided by management and ready for staff to follow. On the basis of Elias and Mead's perspectives on how individuals arise from their social interaction, I am arguing that people join organisations as socially formed selves, with their own meanings. They bring their own identities and subjective ways of making sense into the existing relationships in the organisation and this affects their new relationships and participation in what is going on in the organisation. As social selves, individuals in the organisation continue to interact in ways that shape and reshape their identities, values, attitudes and behaviours. Berger and Luckmann (1966) contend that, "socialisation is never complete". The content of earlier socialisation faces continuing threats from new forms of socialisation in an on-going process of socialisation. It is these local interactions in daily human relationships that are the key to shaping realities in organisations. It can only be by paying attention to these local interactions and emerging patterns that we can begin to make sense of our own practice. Even that act of making sense entails people

negotiating and renegotiating their relationships on the basis of the emerging meanings they attach to what is going on. That continuous process of negotiating and reconfiguring human relationships on the basis of shifting identities and changes in meanings is what makes it difficult to see management practice as a science that can adequately be reduced to some discrete, systematic, complete and predictive elements without losing some meanings of what we do. However, it is important to understand how ways of thinking such as current management theories arise and become socialised in organisations.

### **Institutionalisation of ways of thinking and acting**

While the development of an individual in society is complex, and actually emerges from unpredictable social interactions, management theory joins a whole raft of ways that have been developed to simplify and regulate human behaviour and actions within organisational settings. Backed by the dominant management discourse, the simplification and regulation is largely driven by normative dictates, rationality and desire for social control. This potentially constrains human creativity and understanding of human relationships. Managers are trained to exercise authority to control human behaviour in order to create stability and accurate plans to minimise the risk of failure. At best, the institutionalised simplifications and regulation of management practice such as logical frameworks (logframes) and project management cycles in my Department, have resulted in habitualisation of many acts whereby people stop paying attention to the nature of what they are doing. Logframes are management tools constructed on a theory of change that says that if we put in money into a project, the money will generate pre-determined outputs and outcomes, which in turn will generate pre-determined impacts in poor people's lives. At worst, these simplifications have stifled new ways of thinking by demanding and incentivising conformity with unresponsive tools and techniques. It is ironical that some of the habitualised acts end up becoming the source of resistance to change. Just how far can managers use their hierarchical positions and authority to control human behaviour is part of what I am seeking to understand.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) provide some useful insights into how these ways of thinking are brought about. They raise these insights in the context of the sociology

of knowledge. They contend that the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality and everything that passes for knowledge in society. They look at this as the process of socialisation of the individual into a particular social order. In this context, I am suggesting that we also need to unpack the sociology of knowledge of management theory and practice. To this end, I am building on Berger and Luckmann's two stages of socialisation, namely primary and secondary socialisation. In their view, primary socialisation starts at birth and creates in the new child's consciousness a progressive abstraction from the roles and attitude of specific others to roles and attitudes in general. This includes, for example, how a child learns about shame of nudity, eating and sanitation norms. Secondary socialisation, on the other hand, is seen as the internalisation of institution-based "sub-worlds" when the individual acquires role-specific vocabularies and knowledge based on division of labour and other institutional settings. Primary socialisation is much more subjective and more deeply entrenched in the individual than the secondary type. I am arguing that the theories sustaining the dominant management discourse and staff and management training programmes are forms of secondary socialisation aimed at increasing social control over individuals. My research is therefore examining what these attempts at social control entail for the way we think about management practice and how people come to know what they know, and of course how this knowledge shapes their attitudes, behaviours and actions.

In this respect, Project 1 looked at my own secondary socialisation and how it shaped the way I make sense of what is happening in my organisation. My MBA studies and undergraduate training in accountancy, business law, taxation, management accounting and control, all informed me of the imperative need for planning and control. I experienced this world of order in my first job in which I was required to plan budgets and design accounting systems to help the orderly recording and controlling of financial resources and how people implemented business plans. On the basis of institutional authority vested in me, I was required to set and enforce treasury rules for entire government departments and demand that all public officers behave in accordance with Treasury rules. I also noticed the annoyance and subtle defiance that often characterised the feedback from those departments as they pushed back what they considered to be punitive rules. I began

to experience the pervasiveness of institutional order and how it was seen as the only way to make sense of what was going on. If anything was not in accordance with set rules, systems, values and structures, then it was considered wrong, unacceptable and had to be removed or corrected. I came to understand the world as a well organised realm in which everything had to have its place and time. Things were either right or wrong. I became a stickler for order. This socialisation shaped the meanings that I attached to various forms of human relating within organisations. I understood this as the normal social order without questioning its basis. However, in this research, I am beginning to interrogate this basis.

### **Management practice as a form of social order**

Berger and Luckmann (1966) raise this question: In what manner does social order itself arise. Their general response is that “social order is a human product, more precisely, an ongoing human production”. In other words social order is not seen as biologically set and constructed. I am suggesting that management practice is an ideologically driven process of attempting to define a particular social order on the basis of which those who own or control resources seek to configure power relations and what is acceptable and what is not. The ideological foundations are deeply anchored in the history of management itself and society, more generally. From Karl Marx (1887)’s theories of division of labour in *Capital*; Frederick W. Taylor (1911)’s work on *Principles of Scientific Management* and modern theories represented by writings of, among others, Thompson and Strickland (1999), the ways of understanding management has continued to change. Social order exists only as a product of human activity and it arises from ever changing power relations in human relating. It arises from what people do together. Social order does not stay fixed. It is temporal and does mean different things to different people and often emerges in conflictual interactions. To my mind, this gives us a basis for interrogating and problematising the well established best practices of management in my Department and elsewhere, where good management practice is only seen through clear command structures, absence of conflict, unity of purpose and supposedly shared identity. How else does one explain huge executive pay packs when low level employees get a minute fraction of that? Is this not part of the corporate social order that is now universally taken as given and whose validity is

seen as self evident in organisations? How is it sustained and how do the different employees make sense of that? I see the management practice in my Department as an on-going battle to configure social order within the organisational settings. It is an on-going process of local interactions among staff in which various forms of reality are emerging. It is being shaped by the history and identity of the Department, the individuals and groups of individuals in the organisation, all interacting in complex ways. It is an on-going battle of just causes in which power relations are inevitably and continuously being configured and re-configured. This includes ways in which and what decisions are made in the organisation as well as which people get what positions. For example, I saw people with far less educational qualifications being promoted to top positions in my Department ahead of those with far superior qualifications. My view was that those staff members with very strong and fairly rigid ways of making sense were seen as more willing to enforce policies, rules and procedures, without raising many questions about what they are doing. In thinking about this question, I am also intrigued by Berger and Luckmann (1966)'s view that:

Institutions always have a history, of which they are the products. It is impossible to understand an institution adequately without an understanding of the historical process in which it was produced. Institutions also, by the very fact of their existence, control human conduct by setting up pre-defined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible. Berger and Luckmann, (1966), p72.

Berger and Luckmann on this point tell us that each society or community has a historical context from which a particular social order arises and there are various ways in which that order is shaped and functionalised or institutionalised. Organisations, educational and research establishments and professional training institutes are part of the institutions through which ways of thinking about management are transmitted. My interest in this research is to seek to understand how this institutionalisation manifests itself in local interactions at individual and group levels. In other words, how are the ways of thinking functionalised in day to day human relationships within an organisation? In doing that I realise that it is

important, first of all to unpack the concept of organisation which appears to be taken for granted in management theory and practice.

### **Inherent social nature of organisations**

My key questions on organisation are: What are organisations and in what ways do they relate to individuals who participate in them? Can there be an organisation without people? My research brings out the point that organisations are inherently social. Although organisations have been reified in different ways including being treated as legal persona, in actuality they represent people in different and ever-changing social relationships. Stacey (2007, 2010) gives us very useful perspectives on organisations. He draws heavily from Mead (1934)'s theories of mind, self and society and postulates that organisations are better understood as "population-wide patterns comprising collective identities" and that these patterns emerge from complex responsive local interactions in which individuals enable and constrain each other through iterative gestures and responses. In my view, Stacey's perspective on organisations gives us very rich and robust insights into the social nature of relationships between individuals and within groups and how we can make sense of the reality of management practice. In particular, the view of complex responsive processes during human relating highlights the presence of spontaneity, novelty, emergence and unpredictability in social interaction and human behaviour. My finding is that it is not just the organisational structures, rules and regulations that influence human behaviour and relationships in organisations, but the entirety of complex human experiences and interaction. One cannot invoke organisational structures, rules or regulations without bringing the entirety of human experiences into it. To my mind, this raises questions about the notion of managerial control in management practice. If reality emerges from the totality of what people do together, how can it be that managers are seen as having power and being responsible for regulating human behaviours in an organization? I would argue that only by participating in local interaction can managers influence what is going on and that is a different form of power relations than that implied in the managerial control theory espoused by the dominant management discourse. This is hugely important for understanding what actually enables and constrains human behaviour in organisations.



## **Being human and power relations in social interaction**

So far I have discussed social interaction without defining it. In fact, social interaction refers to the whole gamut of dynamic human relations as they occur on a daily basis. Therefore, it is an inclusive term to capture all possible ways of human relating as they are experienced in life. Arguably, it can be said that human relating in general includes both: good and bad, formal and informal, rational and irrational, honest and dishonest, sincere and insincere dimensions. As stated at the beginning of this synopsis, my narrative research is interested in understanding the role of power relations, values, rules, identities, norms, ideologies and the totality of the individual's emotions in shaping local interaction and daily human relating within organisational settings. Briefly, I have found that power relations arise and exist in and shape every human interaction while those interactions shape the power relations at the same time (Foucault, 1994). Values, ideologies and norms are generalised idealisations which individuals particularise in their local interaction (Stacey, 2007; 2010). These arise in the social as individuals and society form each other at the same time (Mead, 1934; Elias, 1991). Rules are formed in human relating as part of social control (March et al, 2000). Identity arises from human interaction and can take the form of language, race, religion, gender, ethnicity, region, ideology, location, rank, relationship, social class, beliefs and ways of thinking. Identity tends to be temporal and it is always shifting as people interact. Emotions arise from both biological and social formation of individuals and are deeply embedded in meanings and relationships. Emotions include fears, love, hatred, anger, sentimentality, feelings, revulsion and other deeply imbedded dispositions. All these attributes differ from individual to individual and interact in very complex ways during human relating. This complexity of human relationships is what makes management practice a complex undertaking, for which normative and rational thinking alone cannot fully explain nor help us to understand reality.

The question is: in what ways do social interactions help us better understand management practice. I start to respond to this question by recognising that power is ingrained in all human relationships. Foucault (1994) asserts that power designates relationships between people but he also warns that it is not only that. He adds that:

Power exists only as exercised by some on others ... it does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions. It operates on the field of possibilities in which the behaviour of active subjects is able to inscribe itself .... It incites; it induces; it seduces; it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives; makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely. It is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. Foucault, M. (1994), p340-341

Foucault's proposition is that power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus. He is clear that "power is rooted in the whole network of the social". He further contends that power must be understood as a "multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate". In that sense, he sees power as a "process which via struggles and confrontations transforms, supports, or reverses these force relations". Negotiating power relations in daily human lives ranges from covert, subtle and subliminal manoeuvres to overt, aggressive and conscious tactics. My view is that power relations do exist in all social interactions and provide us with ways of making sense of what goes on in management practice. Power relations provide us with context in which to make judgement and draw meanings on what is going on in management practice. This view, I would suggest, challenges the notion in the dominant management discourse that claims that power is vested in or can only be understood in terms of structures of the organisation such as positions, titles, educational attainment, or indeed corporate rules and policies. The experience I got in my Department was that each person in the organisation had power to enable or constrain the other person's actions. This power is constantly shifting during human relating, depending on what is going on at the same time. For, example, a junior employee who knew some damaging secrets about a senior manager was enabled to manipulate the senior manager in a way that other juniors would not. I am arguing that we have to look at the totality of the human relationships to understand how power relations enable or constrain actions and behaviour. This includes the emotional, irrational and uncooperative dispositions of individuals, in so far as they are relevant in shaping reality in

management practice. We cannot rely entirely on approved, formal structures and systems designed by managers alone to understand and indeed influence human behaviour in organisations. I would maintain that even the rationality, knowledge and the truth that is taken for granted in organisations is shaped by power and simultaneously, the rationality, knowledge and the truth produce power. These power relations are negotiated consciously and unconsciously daily, and are the basis on which people co-create the reality that we call management practice in each organisation.

Scott, (1990) brings to our attention the existence of public and hidden transcripts in human relationships. The public transcript, he says, is the open interaction among people whereas the hidden transcript is the discourse that takes place “offstage” in which certain language and gestures such as gossip, mockery, mimicry and insults confirm, contradict or inflect what appears in public. Scott argues that the more unequal the power in the relationship, the more hidden transcript that both the dominant and the subordinate resort to. This is how I experienced the relationships between junior and senior staff in my Department. Junior staff members who sit in open spaces often had to wink at each other or make faces as ways of undermining or disagreeing with information being provided by a senior manager. Staff members clandestinely met in kitchens and along some corridors to gossip about certain truths they knew about the changes that were going on. This behaviour cannot be forbidden, chosen or designed by an external person, but rather emerges from the experiences and meanings arising in the social relationships. My argument is that individuals and group behaviours are not and cannot be prescribed by a manager, but may be influenced by the manager participating both subjectively and objectively in what is going on.

What these writers are bringing to our attention is that human beings interact in the totality of their social experience and not on the basis of rational and regulated thinking alone. Human relating involves values, identities, norms, ideologies and emotions and these arise from the individual and social experiences. I recognise that these human attributes arise from the social in as much as they shape the social. The attributes interact within each individual and between individuals and in groups in ways that are complex and not capable of being planned in advance or controlled

from outside. They occur during human relating in the living present and consequently have capacity to generate novelty, spontaneity and surprise. The interaction and the related behaviours are not necessarily as directed by an external agent. When I look at these attributes in the context of management, I realise that human behaviour goes beyond the normative and rational boundaries set in current management theory, whereby managers are seen as responsible for controlling human behaviours. This, in my view, is where the dominant discourse stands to be challenged on its assumption of managerial control. I am suggesting that because managers do not necessarily have unconstrained control over other employees' behaviours, their leverage may come through the relationships they form with other employees. To that end, managers can participate in local interaction in the totality of their identities, values, attitudes, norms and emotions in the living present in order to co-create the reality they wish to see. The novelty, spontaneity and surprise provide spaces for managers to participate in local interactions in ways that open up opportunities for change. The managers cannot rely on their hierarchical positions or power alone to influence behaviour. Projects Two and Three point out to the fact that much as it is still important to develop strategic plans, it is equally, if not more important, to recognise that strategy implementation cannot simply be understood and acted upon on the basis of hierarchical power and formal institutions alone. The complex responsive processes in social interactions and micro-practices during human relating significantly reduce the managers' ability to decide what the future is going to look like or to fully control the process of shaping the reality emerging.

### **Development Aid as a Social Object**

In discussing how the mind, self and society arise, Mead (1934) proffers the view that these three aspects are all logically equivalent processes of a conversational kind. He tells us that the organised community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called the "generalised other" and:

it is from this generalised other that social processes influence behaviour of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on; that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members, for it is in this form that

the social process or community enters as determining factor into the individual's thinking. Mead, G. H. (1934), p155

Regarding the issue of values, norms and ideologies, for example, following Mead (1934), Stacey refers to the notion of social object to explain how certain things are generalised in society. Stacey says:

A social object is seen as a kind of gesture together with tendencies to respond in particular ways..... The social object is generalisation which is taken up, or particularised, by all in a group /society in their actions. Social objects have evolved in the history of the society of selves and each individual is born into such a world of social objects.... Individuals are forming social objects while being formed by them in an evolutionary process. Stacey, R. D. (2010), p164

Stacey goes on to say that when we start to idealise those social objects, we start creating values, norms and ideologies and we start particularising the general and functionalising of the idealisation in local interaction. It is from the local interaction that identity arises and that identity shapes local interaction and our relations with others at the same time. This view of the individual tells us that each person's behaviour develops uniquely from their personal circumstances and relationships with others as they particularise those generalised forms of social objects.

Project Three provided a detailed account of my experiences of organisational change in which I led a group of donors in negotiating some development programmes in Southern Africa (SADC). In the narrative, my account was about how I found myself leading a team of donor representatives on a mission to convince a regional economic group, SADC, to create an autonomous body (SRO) to carry out the mandate for agriculture research using donor funds. I explored how global values and idealisation of Aid to the poor impacted on the change process. I also observed how over the last few years, aid, poverty reduction and economic growth have become prominent issues, idealised and generalised as 'social object' (Mead, 1934). I pointed out that more than ever before, aid and poverty reduction now enjoy the highest political recognition and financial commitments ever in

human history. They have been functionalised in national, international political debates and engagements and given full expression through international, regional, national and local institutions.

I took up the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the language of development as given. The team that I led coalesced around these MDGs and did not question the meaning of development and these values and ideologies to our interlocutors in the developing countries. The interlocutors' responses appeared very poor and negative. My team understood the behaviours of our counterparts as resistance to change.

I reflected on the language that my team was using in our interaction with the SADC officials. My team was comfortable with terms such as developing countries and developed countries, international development targets without understanding that these terms are contestable and subject to different meaning, depending on our identities. Johnson and Duberley (2005) point out that certain ways of thinking are so embedded in our language and culture that it can seem to many of us to be simply a matter of common sense and as such, natural and taken for granted. As representatives of rich developed countries, I now understand that we were coming across to our interlocutors like dominant and powerful benefactors, imposing ourselves and our values on them on the basis of our aid money (Scott, 1990). As an employee of a development agency, I was probably driven by my pursuit of career and recognition within my workplace as well as responding to a higher call of public responsibility; whereas our counterparts may have been motivated by the political realities in their region and member countries' determination to push back what they considered neo-colonial subjugation.

This experience brought out to me the role of ideologies, culture, values, identities and language to power relations and how this shapes conversations and discourses as people interact within organisations and communities (Wooffitt, 2005). In spite of our Terms of Reference (TORs), I found my team less reliant on blueprint TORs for change and focusing on shaping the actual conversations between our teams as a new form of reality was emerging. I experienced much more space for change as my team interacted with SADC officials through a series of gestures and responses

that none of us had planned, but nevertheless, which proved much more acceptable to both our teams. What this means for me is that management practice must be informed by context that people form for each other.

### **Change and how social interaction determines management context**

Management practice takes place in a context of continuous change. In a paradoxical way, managers in organisations seek to create stability while at the same time seeking to effect change. I therefore view managers as seeking to create stable change in which they retain control. Building on Stacey (2007; 2010)'s challenge of the view that managers act as objective agents standing outside organisational systems to craft strategies for achieving pre-defined organisational outcomes without both internal and external interference, I am adding that managers are in fact participants (not sole controllers) in processes of seeking to effect the stable change.

The question is what is the reality of the crafting and implementation of a strategy. In what way does social interaction actually define the reality of strategy formulation and implementation? In my Department, strategy development and implementation turned out to be a highly contested process in which people participated with all their emotions, fears and anxieties. On the basis of the views of Mead (1934), Elias (1991), Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Stacey (2007, 2010), I am arguing that we have to pay attention to the individual and the environment that he/she forms with others in seeking to understand management strategy development . It is in this social environment of local interactions that meanings arise, change is enabled and constrained, behaviours and actions are shaped and ultimately reality is co-created. Even the World Bank's publication, *The World Bank's Approach to Public Sector Management 2011-2020*, accepts that what works in public sector management reform is highly context-dependent. Elias (1991) particularly confirms this view when he posits that:

People change in relation to each other and through the relationship to each other, they are continuously shaping and reshaping themselves in relation to each other. Elias, N. (1991), p25

To my mind, this means that change occurs in the context of human power relationships in which they constrain and enable each other on the basis of their identities, attitudes, values, perceptions, emotions, fears, expectations, motives and interests. The identities, attitudes, values, perceptions, emotions, fears, motives and interests themselves arise from the social and in relation to others. This to me raises a number of questions about the way we conceptualise management theory and practice. I am suggesting that managers do not solely determine nor do people freely choose their identities, attitudes, values, perceptions, emotions, fears, expectations and motives. These human dimensions arise from social relationships and personal experiences. As such, it is not for a manager to decide or force other employees on which of these human attributes to build into their behaviour. As I have already pointed out human behaviour is shaped through complex responsive processes in which daily local human interactions shape the macro-patterns while at the same time the macro-patterns will be shaping the local (Stacey, 2007; 2010). A strategy emerges from these interactions. I posit that any management tools and techniques, principles and models that do not pay attention to these daily local interactions will amount to practising management as theatre. Practising management as theatre means putting up a show in which both the actors and the audience participate but clearly knowing that what they are witnessing is not real, possibly some form of entertainment or fantasy. Managers and employees act and behave as if they are following a script written and designed to present a particular view of life, based on the audience that each organisation thinks it is facing. According to Goffman (1959), “life itself is a dramatically enacted thing” in which

Those who participate in the activity that occurs in a social establishment become members of a team when they cooperate together to present their activity in a particular light. Goffman, E. (1959) p78

My understanding of Goffman in this case is that because of the interdependence of human beings, their power relations and the environment they form for each other, they often collude in order to sustain certain behaviours and actions that serve both their shared and diverse interests. This behaviour in organisations sees management practice becoming a game in which some win and others lose. Those who win



reward themselves and those who lose get punished. Punishment and rewards become instruments used by managers to sustain certain power relations in which they maintain social control. This is illustrated more vividly in project 4 as further reflected in the following paragraphs.

### **Social Interaction as political behaviour during management of change**

Project 4 examines social interaction as political behaviour during management of change. My research showed that notwithstanding the provisions of Civil Service Code and Civil Service Management Code, staff and managers in my Department did not act without hidden and personal agendas. Individual staff members and managers varied their behaviours in what was turning out to be corporate survival of the fittest in the context of tough economic challenges and cost cutting measures that included prospects of job redundancies. Senior managers acted in ways that sought to make themselves survive threatening organisational changes. They traded acquiescence to criticism from politicians for survival and favour with the new government ministers. They used colourful and persuasive language to communicate the unpleasant changes that were ushered in by the coalition government in order to win the hearts and minds of staff, even though some of the statements they made contradicted the reality emerging in daily interaction. Management sometimes appeared to be communicating different messages from what their behaviours demonstrated. Runciman, (2008) attributes this type of behaviour to hypocrisy. He puts this in the context of:

A problem of language and the difficulty of saying what you mean in a political environment in which there are often good reasons not to mean what you say. Runciman, D. (2008), p6.

What comes as even more incisive in Runciman's views is his acceptance that:

No one likes it (*hypocrisy*)<sup>12</sup>, but everyone is at it, which means that it is difficult to criticise hypocrisy without falling into the trap of exemplifying the very thing one is criticising. Runciman, D. (2008), p1

What Runciman says is that there is a certain level of hypocrisy that is inevitable and even acceptable in all of us. This seems to suggest that hypocrisy is not inherently bad or automatically reviled in society. In management practice, there is also a degree of hypocrisy that can be seen as productive in the sense that it may help preserve or protect relationships. However, this level of acceptable hypocrisy is context specific and emerges from local interaction.

Meanwhile, global and national political processes were shaping ways of thinking and behaviour in my Department. The uncertainty and shock that staff were experiencing as a result of deep public sector and civil service cost cutting measures made them vulnerable and malleable. Senior managers and staff resorted to pleasing their bosses rather than pursuing what was right in terms of their professional calling. Senior managers performed in the margins of the political neutrality demanded by the civil service code of conduct. They criticised the politicians in private for pursuing a narrow ideology while exalting them in public. Managers were using colourful language to paint a rosy picture of the future even when the reality was turning up different results. In other instances, staff members felt that management were outright ambivalent, duplicitous and used “double speak” (Orwell, 1949) language to allay staff fears and concerns. Individual and group behaviours were being shaped by the desire to survive and avoid being in the line of fire in the wake of imminent redundancies.

The social interaction in my Department was gradually intensifying, thereby amplifying political behaviour as the change process unfolded. The intensity was driven by conflict of interest around where to cut costs, ambiguous goals, allocation of scarce resources and unclear direction of organisational change. Staff members sought to build strong networks and alliances in the organisation to buttress their positions against the risks of marginalisation or outright exclusion in making

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<sup>12</sup> My addition in italics

decisions by those perceived to be stronger in the power relations. Meetings were tactfully organised to exclude those not seen as insiders and subtle threats were imbedded in some of the official communications to staff in order to influence their behaviour. On their part, some of the staff members used covert tactics to show their unhappiness with what was going on, including leaking official information to the press and gossiping in the corridors. It became common to hear some managers sharing restricted information with juniors but using such tactics as “this is not to be repeated outside this room” or “do not say that I told you” or “you did not hear this from me”. Sharing such vital information was seen as helping to build staff trust in such managers while undermining those perceived to be withholding that information.

Newly promoted managers quickly assumed the role of gatekeepers for what was allowed to go to senior managers and what language was to be used in communicating on our programmes. Those members of staff identified to be out of line with official thinking unexplainably found themselves consigned to a re-deployment pool, pending relocation or possibly ultimate redundancy, if no other post was available. Being sent to the re-deployment pools was widely regarded in my Department as a source of shame because it reflected failure. Therefore the fear of being sent to the re-deployment pool and even redundancy significantly constrained staff behaviour. A pattern of inclusion and exclusion was forming and members of staff responded by actively seeking to be identified with the more powerful sections of management. This was done through name dropping and repeated use of the new language of value for money, evidence and results. Not using the appropriate language identified one as an outsider.

#### Embellishing performance and pleasing bosses

In the wake of this intense political behaviour, actual performance became blurred and members of staff started engaging in behaviour of seeking to boost appearance of success. As one manager put it, “in this Department and in our current environment, the illusion of success has become more important than success itself”. This was done by hiding any sign of failure and actively building stories of success, even if it meant embellishing them to some extent. This suggested to me

that in organisations, what gets rewarded gets done. Because of the way that management and staff were interacting, a pattern of boosting appearance of good performance emerged across the Department. Individuals and groups were influencing each other in ways that none of them as an individual or group wanted. However, together they were co-creating a new form of reality in which survival and preservation were the main motives.

The main findings from project four were that social interaction in my organisation inevitably involved: 1) people acting with hidden agendas and transcripts, 2) constant negotiations in ever shifting power relationships, 3) people carrying various levels of personal egos, fears, anxieties, ambitions, and 4) jockeying for positions as well as trying to impress their bosses by embellishing their levels of performance. These behaviours are also backed by Buchanan and Badham (2008) who cite both destructive and constructive definitions of political behaviour in organisations. On one hand, they cite Mintzberg (1983) who sees political actions as informal, divisive, self-serving, illegitimate and parochial behaviour of individuals and groups; but on the other, they bring in Ferris et al (2005) who see political behaviour as the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or group/organisational objectives. The findings confirm that social interaction takes varying degrees of political consciousness which in turn shape individual and group attitudes, behaviours, actions and ways of making sense. My experience is that the intensity of political behaviour continuously shifts depending on the context that individuals create for each other. To my mind, management practice does not and should not be viewed as excluding political behaviour – but rather as inextricably enmeshed in politics of what is right and what is wrong, who gets what resources, what decisions and who makes those decisions, what gets priority and what gets dropped, what gets measured and how, who gets the credit and who gets the blame. Human interactions and not tools and methods ultimately determine what actually happens. This to me would suggest that to be effective in organisations, members of staff need to be able to identify, understand and properly interpret and respond to the political context of the workplace. I would argue that managerial competency should demand both technical skills and astute political

behaviour to have influence on human relationships and ultimately the efficacy of management practice.

## **Methodology and Method**

I employed a qualitative methodology in which I used a narrative approach and reflection on the narrative in exploring meanings and ways of making sense of processes and events that I have experienced during organisational change. I used my narrative to question the validity of certain existing ways of understanding organisations, management and change. I tested the narrative by subjecting it to critical reviews and questioning by a community of fellow research participants and practitioners, faculty supervisory staff and also critiquing the narrative on the basis of relevant literature. I engaged in reflexivity as a way of thinking about my own ways of thinking and practice.

The method involves recording and examining my experiences in my day to day practice and reflecting on my own ways of thinking. The method is particularly relevant for purposes of developing knowledge from practice for practice. I tell the story of my experiences in four interconnected narratives and how I make sense of that experience in the context of my life in general and my workplace in particular. I engage specific literature to bring in relevant perspectives to the various themes that emerge in my narratives. Each of the narratives is progressively shared with fellow research candidates in my small learning group and my supervisor, after which we periodically challenge each other on our ways of thinking and the arguments we are making. Four times a year, the faculty convenes community meetings for all research candidates. At these community meetings we meet over four days as small learning groups and also together as a plenary, during which period we share individual progress and challenge each other on the ways we are thinking about our research and practice. These plenary sessions are also interspaced with learning group sessions to reflect on specific themes and ideas. This peer review mechanism helps to challenge and balance the subjective elements coming through our narratives, bearing in mind that the idea is not to eliminate, but

to integrate the subjectivity. Subjectivity involves meanings and interpretations based on personal opinions or feelings rather than on external facts or evidence. Inclusion of subjectivity in the research method enables the measurement of everyday reality in organisations and picks up the emotional and perceptual underpinnings of what in fact goes on during social interactions.

Narrative approach is particularly relevant for researching social science issues in which human agents play a critical role. It is therefore much more useful for understanding the intricacies of individuals, groups, organisations and society in general than other qualitative methods. The narrative approach captures events in their time sequence, the meanings attached to the events and effect on human relationships (Elliot, 2005). Narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself (Reissman, 1993). The narrative approach uses story telling technique to describe what is going on in the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplained meanings can unfold. The primary purpose of narrative research is not seen as a search for the scientific truth, but a quest for meaning (Rhodes and Brown, 2005; Elliot, 2005; Reissman, 1993). The narrative approach enabled me to make sense of the visual, vocal and verbal interactions and what actually went on in my organisation and other communities of people beyond the official and formal perimeters. Specifically, I explored and made nuanced senses of the gestures and responses exhibited by individuals and groups through language, conversations, attitudes, behaviours and actions during processes of human relating. I was able to bring out the content, structure and context of various conversations that characterised human relating in my organisation; and these open useful insights into the motives, fears, expectations and hidden transcripts of human agents.

Mitchell and Egudo (2003) describe the narrative approach as ‘an interpretive approach in the social sciences and involves using storytelling methodology’. Again, the story is understood as an object of study, focusing on how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives. Mitchell and Egudo see the methodology as well suited to study subjectivity and the influence of culture and identity on human conditions. This, in my view, made the approach a much closer measurement of everyday reality in organisations and picks up the emotional and perceptual underpinnings of what in fact goes on during social interactions. Other

research methodologies such as the qualitative analyses of data gathered through surveys, questionnaires and interviews tend to miss these critical aspects of reality. The traditional qualitative research methods seek objectivity as if people always think and act in objective and rational ways. If we accept that people do not always think and act in objective and rational ways, and we take the view that the traditional surveys, questionnaires, interviews and analysis miss the emotional, subjective and perceptual meanings of what actually goes on, then it is very likely that the models and tools that are built from such research and applied as best practice in organisations and management are far more removed from the reality.

Taking my experience seriously

My narrative used as research material, my own experiences and socialisation drawn from my many years of working in public sector and consulting firms in which social and organisational changes have been seen as critical drivers of development and management practice. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of human relations during interaction, I have invoked literature on psychology, sociology, philosophy, organisational change and power. This has informed my engagement and questioning of the current dominant systems-based thinking that has driven management practice for a long time.

The narrative research approach is inherently multi-disciplinary and helped me to capture the complexity of meaning and subtlety of data embodied in my story much more vividly than surveys, questionnaires and other quantitative analyses would allow. I was able to capture for example feelings, body language, images, physical interaction such as handshakes, voice and tone as well as sitting order. I was both an actor and spectator, involved and detached, immersed and abstracting, objective and subjective in the story that brought out actual experiences and meanings. The narrative approach to research is increasingly being taken up by a number of writers who deal with social sciences including sociology, psychology, organisational behaviour, change management and strategic management. I highlight below those who have influenced my research.

In terms of methodology and method, I have taken up the writings of Reissman, 1993 (analysis of both qualitative and quantitative methods in narrative research) Elliott, 2005; Flyvbjerg, 2001 (use of narrative approaches in social research), Haldane, 2008 (how individuals make sense of the world around them), Mitchell and Egudo, 2003 (theoretical underpinnings of narrative research), Rhodes and Brown, 2005 (evaluation of narrative approaches to organisational theories), Alversson and Skoldberg, 2009; Johnson and Duberley, 2003 (reflexivity in management research) and others who have discussed the narrative approach in great depth. There are other writers on the same subject but these are the ones I have found to offer a coherent view on the validity and reliability of the narrative approach to social science research. Reissman (1993) argues that narrative approach gives prominence to human agency and imagination, and that it is well suited to studies of subjectivity and identity. That subjectivity and identity can be taken as the basis of the psychical construction of individuals, through which meanings and sense making is shaped during human relating processes. I related to this view in the sense that individuals, groups of individuals, organisations and society in general do live lives characterised by subjectivity and socially constructed identities; and that is what shapes their behaviour, attitudes, and actions on a daily basis.

Reissman's distinction between the narrative approach and other methods such as ethnographies is really interesting but not so helpful. She points out that ethnography assumes that the first person accounts are realistic descriptions in which language is seen as transparent medium, unambiguously reflecting stable, singular meaning. However, it is important to recognise that methods such as ethnography can also take a highly reflexive approach with a keen awareness of their subjectivity. For my particular study, I find the narrative method most appropriate. As I have already pointed out in earlier paragraphs, meanings are not universal but are perpetually being shaped and re-shaped by our own experiences yesterday, today and tomorrow. Other qualitative research methods include interviewing focus groups, discourse analysis, surveys and structured interviews. However, the major limitation in them is that they do not sufficiently pick the subjective and emotional aspects of human relating. It makes sense in my mind that



in seeking to understand how people and organisations work, we should explore the subjective accounts that are offered through the use of narratives.

Elliott, (2005) sees the narrative as a way of translating knowing into telling, in which the narrator and audience or reader participate in their social contexts as they interact. She argues that narrative structures make us more reflexive about our own research practice, once we recognise the power of those structures to organise our understandings, interpretations, and representations of people's lives.

The narrative approach offers a more relevant way of understanding organisations and human relations. It also challenges the theoretical base of positivist methods which called for collection of quantitative data to support managerially relevant conclusions. The scientifically driven systemic structural-functionalist approaches resulted in simplified models of reality in organisations, which also saw managers taking superficial view of human and power relations. Those simplified models have been institutionalised through coding and adoption as best practices. Their bases and relevance are rarely questioned. I am not convinced that these simplifications and the way they are normatively applied in conventional qualitative research processes give us realistic perspectives of organisations and the arena of management.

Earlier in the synopsis, I raised some questions about attempts to treat management theory and practice as a science. In particular, I questioned whether the social nature of some aspects of management theory and practice can adequately be reduced to discrete, systematic, complete and predictive elements without losing some meaning of what we do. Flyvbjerg (2001), citing the views of Dreyfus (1982), tells us that for a theory to be scientific, it has to meet six criteria of which the relevant ones for me are that it must be 1) discrete – formulated only with context-independent elements; 2) systematic – must constitute a whole in which context-independent elements are related to each other by rules and laws; and 3) complete and predictive – specify the range of variation in the elements and their effects to enable precise prediction. Dreyfus (1982) finds it paradoxical that a science theory that seeks to make possible explanation and prediction, requires that the concrete context of everyday human activity be excluded, and yet this exclusion

of context makes explanation and prediction impossible. My research is also showing that human relationships are complex and cannot simply be understood in terms of normative, rational and predictive rules alone. Research to understand these human relationships must also, of necessity, be capable of looking beyond the normative and rational parameters.

Flyvbjerg (2001) contends that context and judgement are irreducibly central to understanding human action. Traditional quantitative and qualitative research methods that use data from structured interviews, questionnaires and surveys fail to capture the issues of context and judgement. To my mind, it sounds odd that the three criteria for qualifying as a science above all require context-independent rules. Is it possible to reduce management theory into context-independent rules that are complete and predictive? I argue that human relationships in management practice can only make sense in their context. Management practice is social and occurs in the context of human relationships from which subjective meanings, values, attitudes, ideologies, emotions, judgements, identities and power relations arise. I am challenging the notion that context-independent rules can be set up about these human relationships and used to control the behaviours of individuals and groups in organisations. I am arguing that qualitative research method in the form of a narrative can bring out both subjective and objective data with which we can find meanings in human relationships.

### Reflexivity

As I narrated my story, I also engaged in reflexivity to understand myself as a management researcher. Reflexivity is understood as the act of engaging ourselves through thinking about our own thinking (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). Citing the work of (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990), Johnson and Duberley contend that while as management researchers, we cannot eradicate our subjective “metatheoretical” commitments, we must nevertheless open them to our inspection through our capacity for reflexivity. Neurath, (1944) aptly likens reflexivity in management research to sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship without starting from scratch because they cannot put into dock in order to start afresh. The way I understand this is that as researchers in management, we are bound to start from the

knowledge we already have about management. Reflexivity is therefore helping me to be aware of potential constraints between myself and my story as the object of research. It is helping me to understand my role and impact in the research process. That is the way in which my involvement and detachment in data collection, analysis and writing may enable and constrain the research process. Engaging in reflexivity is enhancing the process and product of research by bringing to my attention any potential excesses of my subjectivity.

### **Movement in my ways of thinking and practice**

Many years of my previous training and practice were rooted in the dominant view of management that portrays organisations as systems that function entirely on the basis of designed formal structures, rational strategic plans, written operating procedures, comprehensive rules, shared organisational values, defined roles, responsibilities and authority levels. I understood the world of work through the dogma of managerial control and became a stickler for order in my practice, often resulting in frustration whenever the results were not precisely in accordance with plans. It has now become clear in my mind that this research and engagement in reflexivity have moved my ways of thinking and working. In as much as I accept that planning, organising, leading and controlling are essential functions of management in my organisation, I now regard these pillars as important but not sufficient for understanding and influencing management practice. I now view social interactions and organisational politics as basic ingredients in management practice. These interactions take the form of individual and group relationships, formal and informal, planned and unplanned, predictable and unpredictable, rational and irrational, linear or non-linear, intended and unintended patterns. While management of inanimate things such as goods and services may be easier to plan and execute accordingly, the human interaction is much more complex and dynamic. The responsive processes are shaped by each person's own experiences in relation to others and the totality of his/her emotions, values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and prejudices. Each individual as a social being arises from personal circumstances and relationship with others. This experience differs from one individual to another and thus setting each individual apart from the others. As

such, human interactions have the capacity to generate novelty, spontaneity and surprise in management practice. In other words, one cannot plan or predict future human relationships in any scientific way because they are context specific and arise iteratively. Such human relationships can only be understood in the context of the reality and meanings people co-create together. The spontaneity, novelty and surprise elements make it difficult, if not impossible to plan and predict human relationships in the same way we plan and predict inanimate goods and services.

In my practice, it has now become common to open and sustain conversations that move me and others to better understanding of issues. This is eliciting positive engagement from others and better outcomes in my work. Not closing down conversations too early or excluding others is leading to further exploration of meanings and ways of making sense of our situation and thereby enriching interactions in the work place. There is a much greater degree of critical thinking about my own ways of thinking and challenging myself to understand my own contribution to what is going on.

## **Conclusion**

Experiencing this agonising, tension-filled and yet challenging intellectual shift from the mainstream discourse on management through to complexity-based-perspectives on strategic management and change has given me greater scope and flexibility for participating in my organisation. My daily work responsibilities and demands are largely driven by management tools such as Logframes and Project Management Cycles, couched in long-held conventional management wisdom of managerial planning and control. However, through my research, I am experiencing the emerging complex realities of management and change, informed by a new paradigm that embraces uncertainty, non-linearity, unpredictability, spontaneity, paradoxes, and diversity of meanings of what we do. On one hand, I acknowledge the importance of order and following predictable ways of managing in my organisation; but on the other, able to challenge current practices based on the critical role of social interaction in management and the inherent limitations

imposed by factors beyond human capacity to control the behaviour of human agents. My research has drawn my attention to the way in which each individual and indeed groups of individuals arise in the social, and from which their identities, ideologies, values, meanings, attitudes and ways of making sense are formed. I now understand that human behaviour is shaped by each person's own social experiences and ways of making sense and therefore much less subject to managerial control. My enquiry has led me to conclude that management practice cannot be fully understood in terms of the normative and rationally-constructed tools, techniques and models alone. Management theory and practice cannot adequately be reduced to discrete, systematic, complete and predictive elements without losing some meaning of what we do. Management practice is context specific and best understood in its context, the context in which human beings form for each other. It can only be fully understood if we pay attention to the complex responsive processes in which human relations are continuously changing on the basis of shifting power relations, meanings and identities. These conclusions have led me to the following generalisable ideas.

## **Generalisable ideas**

Individuals participate in organisations in the totality of their social selves

Individuals become and are human through both primary and secondary socialisation. The socialisation is never complete in the individual and continues as each individual interacts with others. Organisations are one of several institutional ways through which secondary socialisation continues to take place. Individuals come into organisations already socially formed and with their own ways of making sense, on the basis of which they participate and negotiate power relations with others as they co-create new forms of reality in what we call management practice. Individuals interact on the basis of both rational and non-rational thinking and their behaviour is shaped by their own experiences, history, values, attitudes, ideologies, feelings, expectations, anxieties, prejudices and all their emotions. Management

practice is thus best understood as social interaction through which reality in organisations is co-created by interdependent people.

Strategy development and management is inextricably political

In my experience, no matter what the state of preparation in strategic management, human relationships in local interactions generate elements of spontaneity, emergence, novelty and surprise that cannot be planned in advance or predicted in any meaningful way. These elements bring up unknowable factors which in turn create big risks for using blueprint strategic plans. I have argued that strategic management is like the preparation and execution of a war in which you don't quite know how the opponent and the natural environmental factors will respond to your own manoeuvres and forays. Much as it is still important to develop strategic plans, it is equally, if not more important, to recognise that strategy development and implementation cannot simply be understood and acted upon on the basis of hierarchical power and formal institutions alone. Open and wider participation by all staff is vital. I posit that strategy is best viewed as practice of what people do and not simply a technical process of planning, implementing and measuring results. Managers can only strategise by participating in the local interactions in which the human agents enable and constrain each other as they negotiate power during their process of human relating.

Understanding Change as continuous emergence of new reality

Organisational change did not happen as a blueprint developed by visionary leaders in my organisation but as part of emerging patterns from the local interactions and macro activities of human relating. The way in which the UK political changes occurred was not a result of grand designs by a group of wise individuals. The changes arose from on-going social interactions within the UK society in which certain contestations in the form of gestures and responses shaped a pattern of public opinion that favoured a certain ideology. The ideology in turn shaped my Department's agenda, behaviour of staff and management and local interaction at the same time that the local interaction was shaping behaviours and the agenda. The national politics have been reshaping my departmental realities in similar fashion.

The complex responsive process perspective presents the power of managers as a function of their participation in these micro interactions within organisations. As such, that participation is seen as a way of making better sense of what is going on and influencing the macro process of patterning and shaping human relating in the living present that ultimately shapes reality. From my research, change can be better understood as a continuous emergence of new realities from both local interactions and emerging global patterns. The interactions are always on-going and therefore change is always on-going in the living present.

### Social Interaction shaping organisations

My narrative has brought up key insights into some critical factors that constrain and enable our attitudes, behaviours and actions during interactions. These include our identities, ideologies, values, self-interests, historical relationships, official and private rules of engagement and the emerging power relations. These factors interact in complex ways that create novelty and spontaneity, which ultimately shape the reality of our actions together.

These values, ideologies, interests, identities, norms and ways of making sense are not biologically embedded in individuals at birth. They emerge from our experiences during the process of social interactions as we grow up as individuals and part of society. Social interaction involves social acts (gestures and responses) that use public and hidden transcripts in ways that ultimately shape reality and construct meanings and how people make sense of what goes on. These interactions take the form of complex responsive processes in which power is negotiated during human relating. On-going conversations make up what we call organisations. I argue that managerial competence demands both technical skills and astute political behaviour to influence human relationships and ultimately the efficacy of management practice.

## **Contribution to practice**

My research offers the following contributions to practice

- Within the civil service, the notion of being neutral civil servants as prescribed by the Civil Service Code simply became rhetoric in the context of a change of government, new ideology and organisational reforms. Civil servants become politically savvy by adjusting their values, behaviours, attitudes, actions and relationships in order to survive threatening changes. Such threatening changes accentuated and amplified political behaviours within members of staff at all levels.
- Human behaviours and relationships (in my Department) are not influenced entirely by the Civil Service Code, departmental structures, policies, rules and procedures alone, but by the totality of their complex human experiences and interaction. This tells us that people think and act with both public and hidden agendas and transcripts as they negotiate power configurations and different forms of social order during management practice.
- Management practice in the public sector can emerge as an ideologically driven process of defining a particular social order in which certain power relations and control over resources are maintained.
- The ways in which humans come to know and make sense of their world offer insights into the limitations of existing management tools, particularly when dealing with human agents. Improved understanding of social changes and how individuals relate to each other and their wider human networks opens new ways of understanding managerial roles, particularly in public sector management where multiple and contestable interests prevail.



- It is not just a sound and rational business proposition that matters in management practice within the public sector, but the extent to which it reflects the reality of social and political interaction too.
- Rigid application of management tools such as Logical Frameworks and Theory of Change Models in the business of international development simplifies things (management) up to a point, beyond which it stifles and constrains human creativity.
- Managers do not have unconstrained control over other employees' behaviour and their influence is limited to what relationships they form with those employees. This was clearly exemplified by the behaviour of staff in my department who interacted on the basis of emerging personal interests and egos, fears, anxieties and ambitions, while at the same time embellishing their performance to impress their bosses and jockey for positions.
- Management practice involves the individuals and the organisational environment that they form with each other in local interactions, from which meanings arise, change is enabled and constrained, behaviours and actions are shaped and ultimately reality is co-created. Management practice is therefore context-specific and is best understood that way.

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